

# **Touchstones: John McGahern's Classical Style**

Indeed there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry.

— Matthew Arnold

In memory of  
Seumas Gildea (1927-2015)

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## Abbreviations

There follows a list of John McGahern's work frequently referred to in abbreviated form throughout this book:

<i>AW</i>	<i>Amongst Women</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>The Barracks</i>
<i>COTE</i>	<i>Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories</i>
<i>CS</i>	<i>The Collected Stories</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>The Dark</i>
<i>GT</i>	<i>Getting Through</i>
<i>HG</i>	<i>High Ground</i>
<i>L</i>	<i>The Leavetaking</i>
<i>LOTW</i>	<i>Love of the World: Essays</i> , ed. Stanley van der Ziel, int. Declan Kiberd
<i>M</i>	<i>Memoir</i>
<i>N</i>	<i>Nightlines</i>
<i>P</i>	<i>The Pornographer</i>
<i>PD</i>	<i>The Power of Darkness</i>
<i>TT</i>	<i>That They May Face the Rising Sun</i>

## **Touching Stones: Matthew Arnold and the Canon**

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

– Matthew Arnold, 'Dover Beach'

Declan Kiberd, John McGahern's one time pupil and later one of his more astute critics, tells a story in the introduction to McGahern's posthumously collected essays that illustrates nicely the Leitrim writer's reverence for the canon, the classic tradition of English literature:

McGahern was a slow, ardent reader and his relaxed but vigilant attention was a kind of prayer. A friend who called once upon him found an anthology of poetry open at Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach'. Months later, that friend returned, only to find the volume open at the same page. 'I'm still looking at it,' McGahern laughed, 'except that now it has started to look back at me.'<sup>1</sup>

That careful reading, that same fixed attention that McGahern brought to Arnold in order to unlock the meaning of 'Dover Beach' is required of every reader who comes to McGahern's work in pursuit of truth and clarity.

McGahern was acutely conscious of the artificiality of art. He was fond of quoting Gustave Flaubert, one of his most consistently present artistic exemplars, on the subject of artistic intercession, stating in the moving television documentary made towards the end of his life, *A Private World*, that the artist should be like God in nature: everywhere present but nowhere visible. This combination of overarching authorial power with continuous invisibility is consistently achieved by McGahern across his works and makes him a difficult writer to critique. It is a quality of style assigned by Paolo Vivante, a favourite classical scholar of McGahern's, to the work of Homer: "The smoothness of a pervasive and self-consistent style gives us the illusion of a work of

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<sup>1</sup> Declan Kiberd, 'Introduction', in John McGahern, *Love of the World: Essays*, ed. Stanley van der Ziel, int. Declan Kiberd (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), xxii.



art as impersonal as nature itself".<sup>2</sup> Where do McGahern's sentences come from? What are they made of? What is their inspiration? What, if anything, are they meant to do? There are times when his prose is so seamless that it appears to be without parentage, sprung from the page as if by magic, as if it were 'natural'. But there are other moments in McGahern's writing where, however briefly, the reader can see some stitching in the cloth, moments in which his prose gives up a secret – sometimes deliberately, sometimes not – as to its origins.

Close reading is described memorably by Tom Paulin as a process of "finding something hidden in the daylight". It is a process that is "at times obsessive, a matter of trusting hunches and intuitions, and weighing particular words that for reasons that aren't immediately apparent seem to stick."<sup>3</sup> Harold Bloom says something similar in *The Anxiety of Influence*: "Criticism is the art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to poem".<sup>4</sup> To hide one's influences, to cover one's traces, is not merely to play some clever game à la Joyce's comment about keeping the professors guessing, but to give greater depth and profundity to one's work. This study will concentrate on a selection of such moments. Much is hidden, and it is my purpose to reveal some of the veiled allusions to texts and writers admired by McGahern, to

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<sup>2</sup> Paolo Vivante, *The Homeric Imagination: A Study of Homer's Poetic Perception of Reality* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1970), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Paulin, *Crusoe's Secret: The Aesthetics of Dissent* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), xii.

<sup>4</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, second ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 96.

speculate on why he should employ this allusive style in the first place, to ruminate on the impact of his reading on his writing, and finally to judge what effect his indebtedness to the classics and his use of allusion might have on us as readers.

The penultimate page of McGahern's third published novel, *The Leavetaking* (1974), sees Patrick Moran, the book's central character and narrator, return to his new wife Isobel in their rented Howth rooms. He is armed with a letter confirming his dismissal as a schoolteacher from the Catholic boys' school where he has worked successfully and diligently for many years. His crime is that he has married an American divorcee in a London registry office. The letter signals the end for the young honeymooners' Irish sojourn; they will return to the London of their meeting, courtship and love on the following day's ferry. The sense is of relief rather than retreat. So far, so autobiographical, as McGahern had himself suffered a similar fate after both marrying a Finnish woman in a civil ceremony disapproved of by the Church and publishing his second novel, *The Dark* (1965), which was, famously, banned in Ireland under the Censorship of Publications Act.

But it is not these biographical aspects of the novel that interest me here -- indeed the reversion to biography is an all too common methodological distraction when it comes to critical reading of McGahern's work. There are, of course, many ways one might approach the reading of the oeuvre, but the way he wished to be read -- as a writer of great literature -- has, so far, been the least common. Moving from the baldly biographical, through the socio-historical, the mature reader must eventually

arrive at a more profoundly literary or poetic approach to the fiction if its full power and beauty is to be unveiled. We must move away from topics like 'McGahern and Rural Ireland' or 'McGahern and Censorship', and towards the aspects of his work which remain hidden in the shade, such as influence and style, in order to get the most out of his writing. Seamus Deane best stated the problem around the standard critical reception of McGahern in his review of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*:

Ever since McGahern's career was initially defined, when his first [*sic*] novel, *The Dark*, was banned and he lost his job as a teacher because of a ruling by the Archbishop of Dublin, he has run the risk of being burdened with the cliché of constant battle with authoritarian tradition. He was launched as a paradigm as well as a writer. Although he has indeed charted the internal history of a culture in which most of the old authoritarian systems have weakened or even collapsed, and has as such retained his status as an emblematic figure, the danger has always been that this view of him would govern the reception of his writing to the exclusion of all else.<sup>5</sup>

McGahern himself explicitly condemned the biographical approach to understanding a text or its writer. In his 1990 review of John Halperin's study, *Novelists in their Youth*, he is acute on this point: "We do not need knowledge of Shakespeare's 'obscure hurt'", he writes, "to enjoy or suffer with Falstaff or Ophelia or Hamlet or Lear". For Proust, the biographical method was, writes McGahern, little more than "one of the many pleasant forms of moral idleness".<sup>6</sup> It is tempting, of course, to read equivalences between McGahern's fiction and McGahern's life. And that temptation became almost

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<sup>5</sup> Seamus Deane, Review of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, *The Guardian* (12 January 2002). McGahern's first novel was not *The Dark*, but *The Barracks*.

<sup>6</sup> John McGahern, 'The Life, the Work and the Hurt: Review of John Halperin, *Novelists in their Youth*', *Love of the World*, 353

overwhelming for some with the publication of *Memoir* (2005). All of those tropes so dominant in the fiction seem to be explained in that book, and the tendency is to attempt to read fictional characters as versions of real people, fictional events as revisions of the author's own life path. But if you stop there as a reader, then there is a danger that the writing will remain – to borrow Cyril Connolly's definition – journalism rather than literature, something that need only be read once to be understood.

For these reasons, this book chooses largely to eschew biography in favour of close reading of the texts. I will begin the exercise with a scene from *The Leavetaking* because I think it the clearest portal McGahern allows us in all of his work to a crucially important influence on his thinking about writing:

The full tide surges against the wall and boats, withdraws, and surges back. "Begin and cease, and then begin again." It was Matthew Arnold. And... "it brought into his mind the turbid ebb and flow of human misery." That bright girdle he spoke of had been long broken for me too before this last night. I turn uphill from the sea and boats towards the room. There are no lights on downstairs. The Logans had gone visiting or early to bed. A line of yellow is drawn beneath the door of the room. She is waiting for me. Her hair is damp as we kiss.

"I went out. I was nervous around the time you had the meeting and I went for a walk along the shore. Look what I found," she hands me a white stone, oblong and round and completely smoothed, blue veins running through the stone, cold and soothing to the hands. Always she brings these stones and shells from the shore.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John McGahern, *The Leavetaking* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 169. McGahern rewrote the original 1974 version of *The Leavetaking*, making extensive revisions, cutting much, and republishing in 1984. The 1974 version concludes the above passage with the following rather puzzling question and answer: "Always she brings these stones and shells from the shore. A child? Rounded and full the lovely body of a woman, shaped for luxury and sorrow; a man's angular body, made for work and strife". See John McGahern, *The Leavetaking* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974), 194. My quotations in the text are from the 1984 version, unless otherwise stated.

Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach', that meditation on lost faith that Kiberd describes McGahern reading until it read him, is quoted directly in this passage. Such quotation is unusual for McGahern, and that he decides to bring Arnold out into the open here should put us on our guard. Prior to *The Leavetaking*, McGahern -- as we shall repeatedly see over the coming chapters -- had allowed the work of writers whom he admired to reveal themselves via various winks and nods, and sometimes a little more than that, but with this novel he made a conscious decision to quote, to name, to point directly to an artistic technique -- it would be the first and last time he would do this so unguardedly, and *The Leavetaking* works as a kind of guide to his allusive style, well worth pondering if we are to come to some deeper understanding of his methods and motivations.

While 'Dover Beach', a poem written by Arnold when -- like the central characters of *The Leavetaking* -- he was beside the sea and on honeymoon, is in plain view in the passage, there is another Arnoldian text hidden beneath the surface which McGahern nods towards, and that is his 1880 essay, 'The Study of Poetry', in which he inaugurates the idea of the touchstone as a means for judging the merits of a piece of literature:

Indeed there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. Of course we are not to require this other poetry to resemble them; it may be very dissimilar. But if we have any tact we shall find them, when we have lodged them well in our minds, infallible

touchstones for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all other poetry which we may place beside them.<sup>8</sup>

McGahern is wedded to this idea of measuring aesthetic value by comparing with past masters; he repeatedly feels the need to reach out and touch great art throughout his writing career, sometimes openly, as with 'Dover Beach', more often in much more veiled ways.

Isobel's bringing her gift from the shore to Patrick is the third such moment in the novel of stones having a power above their mere materiality, and we are told that the presentation of these objects is a persistent habit. During an earlier London meeting, at the beginning of their courtship, Isobel seeks to give Patrick some assurances as to her seriousness about their relationship via the exchange of a stone, this time set in a piece of jewellery:

'How can I be sure you won't disappear on me now?' I was too full of new-found happiness to believe in her anxiety.

'Take this, then.' Almost absently she took a stone of lapis lazuli in a wide silver band I had admired from her finger and gave it to me. 'Keep it till we meet.'<sup>9</sup>

The choice of precious stone in this passage is surely not coincidental: it has become hard for any writer, let alone any Irish writer, to index the luxuriant blue of lapis lazuli without prompting us towards thoughts of W. B. Yeats and his late poem about what he calls 'tragic joy' and man's reaction to war and disaster:

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew Arnold, 'The Study of Poetry', *Essays in Criticism*, second series (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930), 12.

<sup>9</sup> McGahern, *The Leavetaking*, 110.

Two Chinamen, behind them a third,  
Are carved in Lapis Lazuli,  
Over them flies a long-legged bird  
A symbol of longevity;<sup>10</sup>

While it is difficult to draw a direct lineage between the poem and *The Leavetaking* beyond a shared calm acceptance of defeat and trauma, those long-legged birds reappear at the end of McGahern's life, repeatedly flying across the pages of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* as heralds of tranquillity or leading Ruttledge along the shore by his peaceful rural home.

But it would be a mistake to always seek direct matches. In the case of the exchanged ring it has been enough for McGahern to simply utter the magic words 'Lapis Lazuli', and thus let Yeats breathe through the text. For 'Dover Beach' he felt that he needed to do something more concrete, to actually borrow and quote from Arnold, and I will seek throughout this book to consider both types of allusion, the glancing and the direct. Perhaps the best example of the latter type throughout all of McGahern's work comes in *The Pornographer* (1979). In this, McGahern's fourth novel, the title character, Michael, becomes embroiled in an increasingly unhappy love affair with a woman, Josephine, who is his intellectual inferior and whose sentimentality and desire for orthodox romance pitches her lover into ever deepening sloughs of despond:

Troubled by my own confusions in meeting her at the idiotically beribboned almond tree, I started to take down books in the room, unconsciously searching

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<sup>10</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Lapis Lazuli', *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, 2001), 342.

for some general light, as I'd gone out for allies at the first news. It was an ungenerous attitude, but my position was hardly aristocratic. I eventually found a sentence which brought me to a sudden stop: "Everybody must feel that a man who hates any person hates that person the more for troubling him with expressions of love; or, at least, it adds to hatred the sting of disgust." I wrote it down, and kept it about my person like a scapular, as if the general expressions of the confused and covered feelings could licence and control them.<sup>11</sup>

The quote that soothes the pornographer's soul and which he chooses to physically carry on his person is drawn from Thomas de Quincey's *The Lake Poets*, an account of his friendships with the leading Romantic poets of the day, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey. McGahern was likely attracted to this volume for two reasons: first, he was a lover of Wordsworth's poetry since his days as a schoolboy in Carrick-on-Shannon as he recalls in a passage that points to a very early desire to enter into conversation with the great tradition:

In classes, most of the English texts we were given I soon learned by heart -- *Macbeth*, *Henry IV*, *Wordsworth's Prelude*, *Tintern Abbey*, Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, *The Ode to Virgil* -- "Thou / singest wheat and woodland / tilth and vineyard, hive and horse and herd." I used to chant them aloud when I was cycling alone in and out of school on those empty roads. Sometimes I chanted the Ordinary of the Mass, since I now knew the words by heart and they were beginning to take on meaning through Caesar and Virgil and Cicero and Horace.<sup>12</sup>

Shakespeare, Tennyson, Wordsworth, the great Latin poets: these are all writers one might profitably observe as they work their way into McGahern's imagination, though

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<sup>11</sup> John McGahern, *The Pornographer* (1979; London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 137.

<sup>12</sup> John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 169.



of the above mentioned I will choose alone to dwell on Horace, and then only as a means to illustrate the influence of Stendhal.

The other attraction of de Quincey's *The Lake Poets* is that the editor of the edition most readily available to McGahern was a fellow writer and one time literary editor, the South African-born, and London-based, poet David Wright.<sup>13</sup> Wright was the first editor to publish McGahern when he took passages of 'The End or the Beginning of Love' for *X* magazine in 1961. Part of a London bohemian set that McGahern moved in through those vital early years and which I will consider at greater length in my chapter on Patrick Kavanagh, Wright, as well as being a poet, essayist and travel writer, also edited a number of high profile books such as *The Lake Poets* and the much used Penguin anthology, *English Romantic Verse*. His introduction to that volume usefully sets out the distinction between 'romantic' and 'classical' style, a distinction that was important to McGahern and which lies at the heart of his aesthetic project:

The term 'Romantic' obfuscates. It asks for a comparison, always partisan, with its mirror-image, the 'Classical'; the first being seen as the antithesis of the second. A ding-dong battle -- so far as writing about writing is concerned -- has gone on between Romantic and Classical. This debate is really a side-issue -- perhaps it would not be too much to claim that the Classical is an essentially Romantic concept largely introduced, so far as England is concerned, by Matthew Arnold. [...] the Romantic is held to signify the daemonic, subjective,

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<sup>13</sup> The edition in question is Thomas de Quincey, *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets*, ed. and int. David Wright (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970). The quote that the pornographer uses as his verbal scapular can be found on page 361 and describes the unhappy marriage of a Mr and Mrs King, known to Wordsworth, and having a relationship similar to that described by McGahern between Michael and Josephine in his novel. Mrs King has the same character flaws as Josephine and is described by de Quincey as possessing a "spirit of vulgar sentimentality". See *Recollections*, 358.

personal, irrational, and emotional; the Classical to indicate whatever is objective, impersonal, rational, and orderly.<sup>14</sup>

That Wright should beatify Arnold as the inventor of the Classical is not without significance, and it is to this aspect of Arnold that McGahern is turning when he weaves him into the fabric of *The Leavetaking*.

Wright's co-editor at *X*, the Irish painter Patrick Swift, also had some interesting things to say on the subject of the romantic versus the classical temper:

Central to the Romantic view, since it relies heavily on the operations of personality, is its notion of the character and function of the poet. In this it tends to exalt the poet as creator, as opposed to his role as workman. Its fiercest opposition being to those who would make a science of art or of man. [...] It was in a Europe haunted by the intellect of Lord Byron, and already uneasy about the impending horrors of Democracy, that this idea of the poet was born.<sup>15</sup>

As is suggested by this passage, *X* was deeply suspicious of the Romantic school, both in its nineteenth-century form and in its then most recent incarnation via the poetry of the Beats and the prose of Jack Kerouac. It was an unapologetically elitist little magazine that always championed the idea of the poet as clerk or workman as opposed to tormented, Byronic genius. In McGahern, *X* found an enthusiastic disciple, and I will return frequently to the magazine's short but vivid history in the pages ahead.

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<sup>14</sup> David Wright (ed.), 'Introduction', *English Romantic Verse* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), xi.

<sup>15</sup> Patrick Swift, 'Prolegomenon to George Barker', *X: A Quarterly Review*, vol. 1, no. 3 (June 1960), 215.

As with the troubled pornographer, McGahern also wears about his imagination various scapulars to inspire and to ward off weaker words, broken prose and faulty syntax. He leans on a whole range of forebears, from Andrew Marvell to Albert Camus, Dante to Jane Austen, in order to enrich his own writing. This study focuses on those allusions that interest me most and that I consider most revealing of McGahern's broader aims. One might make a much more plenary inventory, and several critics have already done exemplary work in this regard.<sup>16</sup> My chapters will follow a rough chronology in line with the publication of McGahern's major works, so that I will begin by thinking about Joyce as he is used in the 1960s from the unpublished manuscript of 'The End or the Beginning of Love' through *The Dark* (1965) and on to *Nightlines* (1970), and I will end with three essays examining the inner workings of the final novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, with a stress being placed on the presence of Yeats and Dante. Each chapter will begin, as has this introduction, with a quote from the writer McGahern uses as a touchstone.

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<sup>16</sup> For leading examples of such approaches, see Adam Bargroff, 'I don't mind at all': The Case of Bartleby in Ireland', *English Language Notes*, vol. 52, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2014), 97-112; Fergus Fahey, 'Reinvented, reimagined and somehow dislocated', *Journal of Short Story in English*, no. 53 (Autumn 2009), 39-51; Michael Prusse, 'Symmetry Matters: John McGahern's "Korea" as Hypertext of Ernest Hemingway's "Indian Camp"', in Georges Letissier (ed.), *Rewriting/reprising: plural intertextualities* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 22-36; Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993); *idem*, *Young John McGahern: Becoming a Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Stanley van der Ziel, *John McGahern and the Imagination of Tradition* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2016); *idem*, 'McGahern, Austen and the Aesthetics of Good Manners', *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 63, no. 2 (April 2013), 203-222.

W. B. Yeats is a consistent and presiding presence throughout. He is McGahern's most important and most enduring influence, both in his thoughts about the workings of the world, in his choice of images and in his absolute seriousness about art's exalted place. Like McGahern, his outlook was doggedly classicist, despite his protestations that he and Augusta Gregory were "the last romantics".<sup>17</sup> In his late essay, 'A General Introduction for my Work', he stridently reasserts his classical spirit: "Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am nothing. Ancient salt is best packing".<sup>18</sup> It is to Yeats's work that we must return to discuss the third and last sacred stone of *The Leavetaking*. The Yeatsian shadow grows longer if we look at the first half of the novel and a memory Patrick has of a childhood story told to him by his mother, Kate. The touching of a stone again carries with it a ritualistic power -- in this case it is an emery stone that she has been asked to fetch from her mountain home and bring to the fields where her father is scything grass for hay:

The cool silk of aftergrass under her bare feet, the rustle of the poplar leaves, and beyond the blue reaches of the mountain, brought a wildness to her blood as she came back through the meadows, the black stone in her hand, thick and round at its centre, tapering to delicate points at both ends, the flowing rasp of it in his hand against blue steel. She passed a haystack in the old meadow and there the madness took shape. She started to roll the stone up its side, catching it as it fell. Up and down the slack rope she rolled it with excited hands, playing at the edges that turn a child's day to tragedy, until she rolled it quite over the cock. She might

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<sup>17</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Coole and Ballylee, 1931', *The Poems*, 294.

<sup>18</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'A General Introduction for my Work', *Essays and Introductions* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), 522.

have still caught it coming down the other side if she'd rushed round but she stood frozen as it went out of sight.<sup>19</sup>

It is a curious paragraph, and only begins to make sense if we allow both Yeats and Arnold into the picture. Kate's game of rolling the precious stone up the side of a haycock that might 'turn a child's day to tragedy' sees McGahern quoting from Yeats's 'Among School Children'. It is also tempting, in this third example of touching stones in the novel, to see the clearest allusion yet to Arnold's 'The Study of Poetry'. 'Among School Children' becomes an artistic touchstone – a motif that McGahern is surely hinting at in his strange story of the emery stone and its near sacred power and value. If you pick the wrong exemplar—the 'sandstone' which Kate's father has found insufficient for sharpening his scythe – you run the risk of blunting your own prose, and so it is to the durable classics, the black emery stone, that one must turn in order to produce great writing.

Arnold's critical accession of the word 'touchstone' has today become so popular, so ubiquitous, not just in the study of literature but across all fields of human endeavour, that it has -- like the word 'epic' or 'modern' -- lost its force. But McGahern wished to return to first principles, to be absolutely true to Arnold as he originally used the term in that first, highly influential essay. Another of McGahern's gallery of forebears, W. H. Auden, was more sceptical, and wondered about Arnold's impossibly high standards in his inaugural lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry:

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<sup>19</sup> McGahern, *The Leavetaking*, 68-9.

"Matthew Arnold's notion of Touchstones by which to measure all poems has always struck me as a doubtful one, likely to turn readers into snobs and to ruin talented poets by tempting them to imitate what is beyond their powers." It is important here to see that it is not the idea of spending time with the greats that worries Auden in itself, but rather that it takes an exceptional kind of writer to endure the weight of influence, and to prosper at those sorts of altitudes. "A poet who wishes to improve himself", Auden continues, "should certainly keep good company, but for his profit as well as for his comfort the company should not be too far above his station." "Masterpieces", he concludes in characteristically wry fashion, "should be kept for High Holidays of the Spirit".<sup>20</sup>

As with many Auden essays, there's a sprightly informality here, a sense that we are being told a joke, though the writing is so fine and the intellect so lively that it is not possible to say for sure. That Auden was, himself, a powerful enough writer to reach for the most testing touchstones is beyond doubt. McGahern, too, has the intelligence and patience to almost always make the judicious call and keep company with those writers who will enrich and set off his work to best effect. Some handwritten notes among McGahern's papers see him thinking about Auden and the great tradition:

It is with contact with other minds that we sharpen our own  
Auden rephrasing Chesterton

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<sup>20</sup> W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and other essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 37.

No man can lay claim to a full life unless he has broken bread with the great dead<sup>21</sup>

But if Auden had his doubts about the Arnoldian touchstone as aesthetic practice, these were not shared by McGahern.

When delivering that inaugural 1956 lecture at Oxford, Auden was conscious that this very act was a version of reaching for the touchstone as he was repeating what Arnold had done almost exactly a hundred years earlier on his elevation to the same Professorship in 1857. Intriguingly, another to hold the position in more recent years was the Irish poet and sometime correspondent of McGahern's Paul Muldoon who, also conscious of Arnold's looming presence, chose to deliver one of his lectures on the subject of 'Dover Beach', seeing it as inspired by *King Lear* and then subsequently going on to inform writers like Emily Bishop and W. B. Yeats.<sup>22</sup> Yeats's 'The Nineteenth Century and After', writes Muldoon, is "a four-line remake" of Arnold's great poem<sup>23</sup>:

Though the great song return no more  
There's keen delight in what we have:  
The rattle of pebbles on the shore

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<sup>21</sup> McGahern Papers, P71/1289. Handwritten fragment of non-fiction, 2 pages, paginated 6-7 (n. d.), 7. Here McGahern is thinking of the well known maxim of Auden's that "Art is our chief means of breaking bread with the dead".

<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting that *King Lear* is a consistent presence in McGahern from 'The End or the Beginning of Love' in which the character of the mother asks her son to nominate who he loves most to the raging, Lear-like Moran of *Amongst Women*. See McGahern papers, P71/8. Typescript draft of 'The End or The Beginning of Love', beginning "'And who do you love best of all, Hugh?'" , paginated pp 1-304 (n. d.), 8.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures in Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 337.

Under the receding wave.<sup>24</sup>

One can see Muldoon's point -- his opening lecture of the series also saw him think of Yeats, and involved a close reading of the poet's spectral masterpiece 'All Souls' Night', a poem which, I will later show, McGahern uses as a touchstone in one of his finest short stories, 'The Wine Breath'.

McGahern only uses writers whom he has fully absorbed and for whom he has unswerving regard. More often than not he tries to cover his traces, and this tendency to draw near to a writer or text and pull away again into a darker shadow over subsequent drafts is what makes careful examination of his papers in the Hardiman Library of the National University of Ireland, Galway such a rare pleasure for any admirer of McGahern's art. He has an abhorrence of ever being seen as a showy writer, a name dropper, and he jokes about the sorts of intellectual shallowness that can lead to such an approach in both the stories 'Strandhill, the Sea' and 'Hearts of Oak and Bellies of Brass'. In the latter the narrator works on a London building site with a group of Irish navvies: that he has had some secondary schooling he wishes to keep quiet, but one of his co-workers, 'Tipperary', wants to be seen as a fellow intellectual, much to the narrator's dismay:

'Do you think Shakespeare's all he's bumped up to be?' he asked.

He'd heard that I had gone two years to Secondary School, and he believed that he could speak as one educated man to another. He was sometimes called

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<sup>24</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'The Nineteenth Century and After', *The Poems*, 290.



the *Professor*, and baited mercilessly, though there was a purity in his dogged stupidity that troubled them towards a certain respect.

The narrator, anxious to get away, responds that he does not know if Shakespeare is all he's bumped up to be, "but people said so, and it was people who did all the bumping up or bumping down".<sup>25</sup> In 'Strandhill, the Sea' we get a very similar exchange when Ingolsby, a tiresome bombast and one of the guests staying in Parkes' guesthouse along with the boy narrator and his father, persecutes another of the guests, Ryan, for his opinion on "Shakespeare's validity for the modern world", and later on Wordsworth's value.<sup>26</sup> The story, ultimately, is a rejection of utility for imagination, and is deeply jaundiced in its views on empty intellectual showboating.

'Strandhill, the Sea' shares several notable parallels with Forrest Reid's novel *Brian Westby* (1934), a particular favourite of McGahern's, and a book which he made unsuccessful efforts to get back into print during his lifetime.<sup>27</sup> Like McGahern's story, *Brian Westby* revolves around the thoughts of a sensitive young boy on an Irish seaside holiday, and, as in the story, boring and earnest fellow guests are best avoided. Among the McGahern papers are two photocopied sections from the novel. The first circles around Brian's sense of discomfort at having to answer the faux-intellectual Mr

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<sup>25</sup> John McGahern, 'Hearts of Oak and Bellies of Brass', *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 31.

<sup>26</sup> John McGahern, 'Strandhill, the Sea', *Creatures of the Earth*, 43.

<sup>27</sup> On this subject, see John McGahern, 'Brian Westby', *Love of the World*, 188-199.

Graham's inane, self-regarding questions about literature, such as whether he prefers Dickens or Thackeray. This is very reminiscent indeed of 'Strandhill, the Sea' both in content and setting. Mr Graham is a family friend who is holidaying in Ballycastle with his wife and two children and occasionally provides book reviews to *The Book-Lover's Weekly*:

Brian detested the talks about books. Yet he couldn't very decently avoid them. That was the worst of it; he had brought the whole thing on his own head by oiling up to Mr Graham in the first instance, under the impression that he might be useful. [...] He certainly was literary – the most literary person Brian had ever met. 'Where do you place Matthew Arnold?' – 'Where do you place Shelley?' – that was the kind of question he fired at you – always about people you had never read. And it wasn't as if he himself really had anything to say about them: it was just one name after another.<sup>28</sup>

McGahern marks off in black pen those last two sentences, beginning 'He certainly was literary', and one can clearly see them reemerge in 'Strandhill, the Sea'. That Matthew Arnold should appear is also interesting given what we know of McGahern's reading and given the nature of the second short extract to be photocopied and kept. This is just a single, marked-up page of the book's enigmatic conclusion: "When he reached the hotel he turned to the left and went down to the shore. He found the place where they had sat that morning making their plans. But the tide was farther out now: there was a broad strip of uncovered yellow sand between the rocks and the sea."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> McGahern papers, P71/814. Photocopied extract from *Brian Westby*, paginated 82-91 (n. d.), 83.

<sup>29</sup> McGahern papers, P71/815. Photocopy of the last page of *Brian Westby* (n. d.).

McGahern underlines the last sentence and I suspect that this is because it brought Arnold's 'Dover Beach' -- where the tide is memorably described as having a 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' -- to his mind once more. The key point here is that McGahern was a profoundly literary writer who did not wish to seem that way to his readers, or at least not in that vulgar and shallow way trumpeted by the likes of 'Tipperary', Ingolsby and Mr Graham.

Without time spent trawling through the McGahern papers, many of the insights such as the one just discussed would simply not be possible. Hours passed this way in the archive helped clarify, confirm, and, from time to time, inspire, many of my thoughts on his methods and writing practices. Almost every one of my chapters benefits in some way from that work. Sometimes it is a case of simple immersion -- allowing oneself to marinate in draft after draft of a story or passage from a novel so that one enters into imaginative and aesthetic sympathy with the writer. On other occasions the days spent going through these drafts would throw up fresh, new ways of thinking about a text. So, for instance, the realization that Joe Rutledge of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* was at one time named -- however unlikely it may seem -- 'Walter Domino', confirmed for me that Yeats's great dialogue and poetic statement of his doctrine of the mask, 'Ego Dominus Tuus', was a key part of the pattern that made up the novel's overall texture.<sup>30</sup> Or, in the case of 'Bank

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<sup>30</sup> McGahern papers, P71/187. For further discussion of this point, see my chapter 11, 'Deliberate Happiness'.

Holiday', the discovery that the book that so fascinates the narrator at the beginning of the story is Paolo Vivante's *The Homeric Imagination*, helped bring ideas of epic time further out into the open.<sup>31</sup>

From the very first catalogued document in the archive we are exposed to McGahern's writerly proclivities and inclinations. The piece in question consists of thirty-one neatly handwritten pages of what would be the eventually abandoned novel 'The End or the Beginning of Love', and opens thus:

After the examinations in early June the days dragged leisurely towards the long holidays. Master Butler dozed at his table, after giving the class sums which he never corrected. In the afternoon he took the classes into the playground, where the children sat on the heat-cracked ground, and read in turns passages from 'The Deserted Village' which the master slowly commented on.<sup>32</sup>

And that is all we get of Goldsmith in the novel, though *The Deserted Village* remains a presence in McGahern's 1970s' screenplay *The Rockingham Shoot*, a work whose central character is an oldfashioned, nationalist schoolmaster unwilling to see his students work as beaters for the local big house. There is a hint, too, in drafts for 'Strandhill, the Sea' that McGahern wishes to draw near to this fellow great writer of the Irish North Midlands via a reference to a secondary school strongly associated with the young Goldsmith: "you'd a right to seek the divine possession of happiness,

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<sup>31</sup> McGahern papers, P71/569. For further discussion, see my closing chapter on Dante, 'Stranger in Paradise'.

<sup>32</sup> McGahern papers, P71/1. Handwritten draft of opening section for 'The End or the Beginning of Love', 31 pp (n. d.), 1.

and Jane Simpson who was doing her Intermediate next year at the Bishop Hudson Grammar School in Elphin would be with other people there".<sup>33</sup> This detail is dropped from the published versions of the story, a common occurrence across McGahern as his work develops from early draft to final, polished text.<sup>34</sup>

Goldsmith is, therefore, one of many writers I might have written about as they apply to McGahern. But, as with any critical study of this type, choices have had to be made. Some of these choices might seem perverse: I am conscious in particular that the absence of a chapter on Proust is notable, but my feeling was that Proust is such an enormous and consistent presence across the entire oeuvre that a book-length study would be the only appropriate response. That said, Proust cannot -- nor should he be -- kept entirely out of the picture, and he pops up occasionally throughout this study, with some discussion, in particular, of his John Ruskin essays in my closing chapter on Dante. Having devoted several years of his life to studying Ruskin's prose style, Proust was conscious that such reverence and indebtedness perhaps needed some short defence, and he provides this quite brilliantly in the preface to his translation of Ruskin's 'The Bible of Amiens':

Mediocre people generally believe that to let oneself be guided by books one admires takes away some of one's independence of judgment. "What is it to you how Ruskin feels: feel for yourself." Such an opinion rests on a psychological

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<sup>33</sup> McGahern papers, P71/300. Handwritten, pencil draft of 'Strandhill, the Sea', 8 pp (n. d.), 5.

<sup>34</sup> 'Strandhill, the Sea' was first published under the title 'Summer at Strandhill' in *The New Yorker* (21 September 1963), and was re-published with substantial revisions as 'Strandhill, The Sea' in *The Irish Press* (27 April 1968). It formed part of McGahern's first published collection, *Nightlines*, in 1970 and also appears in *The Collected Stories* (1992) and *Creatures of The Earth* (2006).

error that will be treated as it deserves by all those who, having thus adopted an intellectual discipline, feel that their power to understand and feel is infinitely increased and their critical sense never paralyzed. We are then simply in a state of grace in which all our faculties, our critical sense as much as our other senses, are strengthened. Therefore, this voluntary servitude is the beginning of freedom. There is no better way of becoming aware of one's feelings than to try to recreate in oneself what a master has felt. In this profound effort it is our thought, together with his, that we bring to light. [...] it is by subjecting his mind to the expression of this vision and to the approach of this truth that the artist becomes truly himself.<sup>35</sup>

This is exactly how McGahern saw the whole question of influence, allusion and artistic indebtedness: far from being some sort of slavish homage or even plagiarism, to spend time with and to emulate the greats is the pathway to liberty. And so McGahern is never afraid to be seen in the company of those artists he respects and loves.

McGahern shows himself always as a lifelong lover of literature, of great writing, of books that will permit us, via our developing imaginations, to live not just in our own limited world, but in many worlds. In thinking about McGahern, the book-lover, one might usefully turn to a favourite essay of his on the subject of books, *Sesame and Lillies* by Proust's hero, the great Victorian art critic and man of letters John Ruskin. This piece is the dominant force behind a revealing set of notes in the archive titled 'The Idea of Reading and Writing'. *Sesame and Lillies* consists of two speeches delivered by Ruskin in Manchester in December 1864 on the subject of the need for good library

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<sup>35</sup> Marcel Proust, *On Reading Ruskin: Prefaces to La Bible d'Amiens and Sésame et les Lys with Selections from the Notes to the Translated Texts*, trans and ed. Jean Autret, William Burford, and Phillip J. Wolfe; int. Richard Macksey (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 60.

provision. McGahern slightly misquotes one passage in his notes, but the meaning remains unaltered:

But granting we had the wit and sense to choose our friends well, how few of us have the power, how unlimited the sphere of our choice. We may, by good fortune, obtain a glimpse of a great poet and hear the sound of his voice [...] while, meantime, there is a society continually open to us, of people who will talk to us as long as we like, whatever our rank.<sup>36</sup>

What Ruskin actually concludes is that, through the reading of great books, "there is a society continually open to us, of people who will talk to us as long as we like, whatever our rank or occupation; -- talk to us in the best words they can choose, and of the things nearest their hearts".<sup>37</sup> This is very close to that Audenesque idea we saw earlier of reading as breaking bread with the dead. Ruskin's essay was also beloved of Proust, as McGahern well knew, and as he notes in the same document. "Proust quotes this", he writes, "to go beyond it", and goes on to note the French master on the subject of Ruskin:

He did not wish to go to the very heart of *reading*. To teach us the value of reading he simply told us a beautiful Platonic myth, with that simplicity of the greats who have shown us almost all true ideas and have left our modern misgivings the task of fathoming them.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> P71/1300. Handwritten draft of a piece entitled 'The Idea of Reading and Writing', 5 pp. (n. d.), 4.

<sup>37</sup> John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, ed. and int. Deborah Epstein Nord, with essays by Elizabeth Helsinger, Seth Koven and Jan Marsh (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 30-31.

<sup>38</sup> Proust quoted in McGahern papers, P71/1300.

Ruskin was insistent on the point that it is only to those writers we know are greater than ourselves that we should turn in a quest for amelioration:

Do you ask to be the companion of nobles? Make yourself noble, and you shall be. Do you long for the conversation of the wise? Learn to understand it, and you shall hear it. But on other terms? – no. If you will not rise to us, we cannot stoop to you. [...] If the person who wrote the book is not wiser than you, you need not read it; if he be, he will think differently from you in many respects.<sup>39</sup>

McGahern admired this frank and lucid acceptance of an artistic hierarchy, and his own reading was guided by it. "It is", he wrote in his notes, "with contact with other minds that we sharpen our own".<sup>40</sup> In an interview with *Hot Press* magazine late in his life, McGahern was clear about his tastes. "I think human nature never changes very much", he said, "otherwise we wouldn't read the great classics – often they speak to us more intimately than modern works".<sup>41</sup> The reverence for the great dead is everywhere present in his work; conversing with them is what he does again and again in his writing and what, in turn, we do by reading him.

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<sup>39</sup> Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, 34.

<sup>40</sup> McGahern papers, P71/1289. Handwritten fragment of non-fiction paginated 6-7 (n. d.), 7.

<sup>41</sup> McGahern papers, P71/1495. Cutting from *Hot Press* of an interview with John McGahern conducted by Peter Murphy, 58-61 (March 2002), 60.



# I

## **We Other Clerks: James Joyce and the Classical Temper**

The sordid details of his orgies stank under his very nostrils. The soot-coated packet of pictures which he had hidden in the flue of the fireplace and in the presence of whose shameless or bashful wantonness he lay for hours sinning in thought and deed; his monstrous dreams, peopled by ape-like creatures and by harlots with gleaming jewel eyes; the foul long letters he had written in the joy of guilty confession and carried secretly for days and days only to throw them under cover of night among the grass in the corner of a field or beneath some hingeless door in some niche in the hedges where a girl might come upon them as she walked by and read them secretly.<sup>1</sup>

– James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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<sup>1</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), 115-16.

"Joyce's temperament was essentially classical", argues McGahern in his one published essay to look at Ireland's greatest fiction writer, an essay which quickly becomes not about Joyce at all but about Gustave Flaubert, a writer beloved equally of McGahern and of Joyce.<sup>2</sup> What did McGahern mean by this? To prove his claim about Joyce's artistic tendencies, he turns to the composition of *Dubliners* and to the famous passage from Joyce's letter to the publisher Grant Richards in which he says that he has written the stories "in a style of scrupulous meanness".<sup>3</sup> But that does not really help us in defining classicism. What *is* useful is what McGahern has to say immediately after his long quote from the letter to Richards: "The authority and plain sense suggests that Joyce was well aware that he was working within a clearly defined tradition".

Here McGahern can only mean a European tradition, rather than an Irish one, for he has already agreed in his opening paragraph of this essay with Joyce's brilliant, if ever jaundiced, brother Stanislaus who was scathing about the limitations of any Irish writing lineage. To live in Ireland, writes McGahern, "is to come into daily contact with a rampant individualism and localism dominating a vague, fragmented, often purely time-serving, national identity".<sup>4</sup> James Joyce would have agreed. "A

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<sup>2</sup> John McGahern, 'Dubliners', *Love of the World: Essays*, ed. Stanley van der Ziel, int. Declan Kiberd (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 201.

<sup>3</sup> James Joyce, *Selected Letters*, ed. Richard Ellmann (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 83.

<sup>4</sup> McGahern, 'Dubliners', 201, 200.

nation which never advanced so far as a miracle-play", he argued of his native country in one of his earliest essays, "affords no literary model to the artist".<sup>5</sup> Famously, Joyce found Ireland so insufferable that he went into self-imposed exile on the continent from the age of 22 onwards and rejected repeated calls to return in later life, even from such luminaries as his compatriot, W. B. Yeats, then a senator of the Irish Free State and Nobel prize winner. McGahern served his own period abroad, having been abused by Church and censor alike, but, unlike Joyce, found sufficient charm in his native country to draw him back to live there, despite its failings as a civic state.

When McGahern tries to define classicism, he chooses to compare Joyce with George Moore (1852-1933), but rejects what he considers a misguided critical tendency in some quarters to see Joyce's *Dubliners* as influenced by, or intersecting with, Moore's 1903 collection of stories, *The Untilled Field*. The difference in temperaments between the two writers "makes the attempt to force the two books into the same tradition extraordinarily misplaced". This is not to say that McGahern did not admire Moore or some of his works: "The author of *The Lake, A Drama in Muslin, Hail and Farewell*", he tells us, "was a writer of genius".<sup>6</sup> In fact, such is McGahern's respect for Moore that he borrows from the plot of 'Home Sickness', the most celebrated and accomplished of the stories in *The Untilled Field*, to embellish *The Leavetaking*. Both texts use the

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<sup>5</sup> James Joyce, 'The Day of the Rabblement', in Joyce, *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing*, ed., int. and notes Kevin Barry, trans. Conor Deane (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 50.

<sup>6</sup> McGahern, *'Dubliners'*, 201, 200.

plotline of a woman falling for a returned Irish-American man only to be abandoned when her lover disappears back into the anonymous American expanses, never to be contacted again, but suspended in a life of watching and waiting for word from abroad.<sup>7</sup>

So what is the problem with Moore then? What makes Joyce the better writer in McGahern's eyes? Tradition, clarity and truthfulness all blend to form an answer that tells us as much about McGahern as it does about his two Irish literary antecedents:

To look towards Moore for any tradition is not useful. All of Moore is self-expression: he constantly substitutes candour for truth. In *Dubliners* there is no self-expression; its truth is in every phrase.

McGahern then closes the paragraph with a slight misquotation from Flaubert before launching into an admiring passage about the French master's aesthetic praxis. "The author is like God in nature", he writes, "present everywhere but nowhere visible".<sup>8</sup> Joyce, too, liked Flaubert's idea of the omnipotent, omniscient, but necessarily invisible, author-God, and has Stephen Dedalus of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* promote an image of the writer as an impassive deity: "The artist, like the God of

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<sup>7</sup> On McGahern's uses of Moore, see Conor Montague, 'Two lakes', *The John McGahern Yearbook*, vol. 4 (2011), 85-94.

<sup>8</sup> McGahern, '*Dubliners*', 201, 201.

creation, remains within or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails."<sup>9</sup>

Moore's habitual self-expression leads, if one follows McGahern's argument, to a lack of exactitude, a blurring of truth with fancy. Joyce memorably mocks Moore's imprecision in a letter to Stanislaus:

I have read Moore's 'Untilled Field' in Tauchnitz. Damned stupid. A woman alludes to her husband in the confession-box as 'Ned'... A lady who has been living for three years on the line between Bray and Dublin is told by her husband that there is a meeting in Dublin at which he must be present. She looks up the table to see the hours of the trains. This on DW and WR where the trains go regularly: this after three years. Isn't it rather stupid of Moore.<sup>10</sup>

*Dubliners*, argues McGahern, by steering clear of self-expression, manages to avoid repeating the same mistake: "The prose never draws attention to itself except at the end of 'The Dead,' and by then it has been earned: throughout, it enters our imaginations as stealthily as the evening invading the avenue in 'Eveline'. Its classical balance allows no room for self-expression". Synonymous with 'classical balance' in McGahern's eyes, is 'scrupulous meanness', an artistic technique that leads to writing never exaggerating, always remaining cool and without sentimentality. Committing oneself to such a course of action in the artistic realm can lead to being rejected or misunderstood by readers, a fate, McGahern writes, suffered by both Flaubert and by Joyce: "The first reactions to *Dubliners* were not unlike the criticism Flaubert had to

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<sup>9</sup> Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 215.

<sup>10</sup> Joyce, *Selected Letters*, 44.

confront until the end of his life: that the work was depressing, with no uplifting message, too withdrawn and cold; and, though all too accurate, lacking in feeling and compassion".<sup>11</sup> One catches in this description a sense that McGahern is thinking about the reception of his own writing and the all too frequent misconceptions and misreadings brought to it over the years, particularly in the wake of the banning of *The Dark*, a novel, interestingly, that owes more to Joyce than to anything else McGahern would publish over the course of his writing life.

*Dubliners* continued to be the Joyce book with most influence on McGahern, though he writes in his essay on the collection that parts of *Ulysses* rise to the level of art he so admires in the stories while his attitude to the anarchic experiment of *Finnegans Wake* remains at best ambiguous: "We have left the world of letters and reached impure sound. *Finnegans Wake* is a work of genius, Mr T. S. Eliot, Joyce's great supporter, suggested, but of such a kind that one such is enough".<sup>12</sup> One sees McGahern's delight in the comedy of a story like 'Grace' or in the bar room *non sequitors* of *Ulysses* peppering his first published novel *The Barracks*. Take, for instance, this absurd exchange between the barracks' guards about the height requirement for entry to the Garda Síochána:

'Isn't it strange,' he said, 'that with all the men that ever went into the Depot none of them were exactly six feet?'

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<sup>11</sup> McGahern, 'Dubliners', 207, 202.

<sup>12</sup> John McGahern, 'Mr Joyce and Mr Yeats: Foreword to a *James Joyce Exhibition Catalogue* at Colgate University', *Love of the World*, 185.

'That's right,' Mullins asserted. 'No man ever born was exactly six feet. It's because Jesus Christ was exactly six feet and no man since could be the same height. That's why it's supposed to be!'

He had taken the words out of Brennan's mouth, who twisted on the chair with annoyance and frustration.

'I often heard that,' Elizabeth joined, more to counteract Reagan's bored restlessness and silence than any wish of her own to speak.

'It's like the Blessed Virgin and Original Sin,' Brennan rushed out again and went on to quote out of the Catechism. '*The Blessed Virgin Mary by a singular privilege of grace was preserved free from original sin and that privilege is called her Immaculate Conception.*'

'Six feet is the ideal height for a man,' Mullins asserted again.<sup>13</sup>

One is reminded here in particular of the hilarious exchange in 'Grace' around the origins of Papal Infallibility which concludes with the recalcitrant Archbishop John MacHale of Tuam roaring his agreement to the new doctrine once the Pope speaks *ex cathedra*. McGahern was not the first Irish writer to pay homage to Joyce in this way: Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) is also full of similarly ludicrous, ill informed conversations about such matters as the supremacy of Irish long jumpers and the desirability of death by drowning over burning.

In thinking about Joyce, McGahern returns repeatedly to the idea of the writer as dispassionate and precise, eschewing the gusto and emotion usually associated with a more romantically tinged sense of the artist. In his 1979 preface to a *James Joyce Exhibition Catalogue* at Colgate University, this preference for the classical over the romantic is summoned up in a recollection of Joyce's admiration for Thomas Hardy:

When asked to contribute to a special Thomas Hardy number of the *Revue Nouvelle* in 1928, Joyce wrote:

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<sup>13</sup> John McGahern, *The Barracks* (1963; London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 30.

But whatever diversity of judgement may exist about his work (if any does exist), it is none the less evident to all that Hardy demonstrated in his attitude of the poet in relation to his public, an honourable example of integrity and self-esteem of which we other clerks are always a little in need, especially in a period when the reader seems to content himself with less and less of the poor written word and when, in consequence, the writer tends to concern himself more and more with the great questions which, for all that, adjust themselves very well without his aid.

[...] The poor written word... we other clerks... *la pauvre parole écrite... nous autres clerks...* I find the statement not only moving but useful. They were uttered by a great clerk. They are even more needed now than then.<sup>14</sup>

Writing, then, for McGahern is a job like any other, not some mystical vocation; it is a question of slow, patient work rather than sudden, flashing brilliance. That said, he did also strongly believe in individual talent and had an aversion to the relatively recent, fashionable notion that creative writing can be taught. One document among his papers sees him make a list of seventeen points about writing. Items one and two read as follows:

1. Dislike term 'creative'.
2. Taught it once in America – 'Reckon I ain't buying that crap'.<sup>15</sup>

In all of these artistic proclivities, McGahern is inspired by Joyce and by Joyce's most eloquent mouthpiece, Stephen Dedalus. In reflecting on this inspiration, we should dwell for a moment on Stephen's most ample explanation of the classical temper, that

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<sup>14</sup> McGahern, 'Mr Joyce and Mr Yeats', 186.

<sup>15</sup> McGahern papers, P71/1296. 17 handwritten points about writing. It is not clear who McGahern is quoting here -- likely an American student or colleague at Colgate.



which comes in *Stephen Hero*, Joyce's abandoned test run for *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Like McGahern, Joyce could admire the romantic artist without having any desire to emulate him. "It is many a day", Joyce writes in his essay on the nineteenth-century Irish romantic poet James Clarence Mangan, "since the dispute of the classical and romantic schools began in the quiet city of the arts".<sup>16</sup> The preparations for what would become this essay are described in detail in *Stephen Hero* where it bears the title 'Art and Life'. Here the romantic temper is held up alongside the classical and is found wanting. It is the same comparison McGahern is making when placing *The Untilled Field* alongside *Dubliners*:

Classicism is not the manner of any fixed age or of any fixed country: it is a constant state of the artistic mind. It is a temper of security and satisfaction and patience. The romantic temper, so often and grievously misinterpreted and not more by others than by its own, is an insecure, unsatisfied, impatient temper which sees no fit abode here for its ideals and chooses therefore to behold them under insensible figures. As a result of this choice it comes to disregard certain limitations. Its figures are blown to wild adventures, lacking the gravity of solid bodies, and the mind that has conceived them ends by disowning them. The classical temper on the other hand, ever mindful of limitations, chooses rather to bend upon these present things and so to work upon them and fashion them that the quick intelligence may go beyond them to their meaning which is still unuttered.

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<sup>16</sup> James Joyce, 'James Clarence Mangan (1902)', *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing*, 53.

Stephen tries to sum up what he means by all of this to the President of the College in a fractious exchange a few pages later. "By 'classical' I mean the slow elaborate patience of the art of satisfaction. The heroic, the fabulous, I call romantic".<sup>17</sup>

McGahern is capable, too, of seeing merit in the romantic though he always places the classical temper in the ascendant. An unpublished address from 1999 sees him ponder Joyce's criticism of romanticism as it is applied to Irish nationalism via the character of Miss Ivors in 'The Dead'. Miss Ivors famously accuses Gabriel Conroy of being a 'West Briton' because he shows no interest in holidaying on the Aran Islands or in learning the Irish language. Her sentiments, writes McGahern, can be seen to be "deriving from 19<sup>th</sup>-century Irish Romanticism, a myth fashioned by many hands, Yeats, Standish O'Grady, and the thousands of poets around the Nation newspaper". Such a flowering of art, thinks McGahern, might be welcome were it not for the political violence it nurtured: "This became linked in turn to armed struggle validated by the idea of blood sacrifice [...] with the collapse of the constitutional struggle it was given a free field and took over, leading to 1916, and all that followed". While it is clear that McGahern considers this bleeding of the artistic into the political to be undesirable, he still sees in the romantic movement of this period a fertile seedbed, and a place from which several of the writers he most admired could emerge: "Miss Ivors is articulating to Gabriel the tenets of Romantic Nationalism much as some

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<sup>17</sup> James Joyce, *Stephen Hero: Part of the First Draft of 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man'*, ed. and int. Theodore Spencer; rev. ed. with additional material and fwd. John J. Slocum and Herbert Cahoon (1944; rpb. London: Paladin, 1991), 83, 102.

university young people today might repeat word for word the simplistic edicts of Sinn Féin. What resulted from this romantic movement beside Yeats's poetry was Synge's classic *The Aran Islands*, which is itself a product of the 1890's romantic aestheticism".<sup>18</sup>

Joyce, of course, while growing up in and alongside the Irish literary revival also represents, in his reverence for the classical over the romantic temper, the earliest serious break with revivalism to emerge within Ireland. He did not idly choose 'Dedalus' both as his own pseudonym and as his hero's name.<sup>19</sup> The great designer and inventor of Greek myth Daedalus was responsible for the creation of King Minos's Cretan labyrinth. But such creations do not come by inspiration alone, and Stephen -- the great artificer's namesake -- embraces the notion of art as labour:

it is necessary for an artist to labour incessantly at his art if he wishes to express completely even the simplest conception and he believed that every moment of inspiration must be paid for in advance. He was not convinced of the truth of the saying 'The poet is born, not made' but he was quite sure of the truth of this at least: 'The poem is made not born.'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> McGahern papers, P71/1494. Handwritten draft of a public address beginning 'The central theme of this address is that if style is the most important element in writing'. Written on the back cover of *The Reader*, no. 4 (Spring/Summer 1999).

<sup>19</sup> The earliest *Dubliners* stories to be composed by Joyce -- 'The Sisters', 'After the Race' and 'Eveline' -- were published in *The Irish Homestead* under the pseudonym 'Stephen Daedalus'. Joyce later drops that first 'a' in the surname for the hero of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

<sup>20</sup> Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, 37.

In all of this Joyce is again thinking of Flaubert, who, in another of his marvelous letters to Louise Colet so admired by McGahern writes that "Style is achieved only by dint of atrocious labour".<sup>21</sup>

Admiration, of course, can bring its problems. Joyce was in thrall to Flaubert throughout his writing life, going so far as to holiday in Normandy to visit sites associated with his literary hero, but he managed through hard work and intelligence to forge his own style while still ever conscious of Flaubert's presence and happy to permit the occasional nod or doffing of the cap. As such, as Scarlett Baron has argued in her brilliant study of intertextuality in Joyce and Flaubert, "textual interchange between two of the greatest masters of prose fiction is neither a question of plagiarism nor of banal reiteration: Joyce's adoption of Flaubert is always also an adaptation".<sup>22</sup> A problem faced by every Irish writer of fiction since Joyce is how to prevent one's admiration and indebtedness to the man from becoming a kind of plagiarism, and McGahern takes this conundrum on more successfully than anyone in the Irish post-war canon in novels like *The Barracks* and *The Dark*, and short stories like 'My Love, My Umbrella' and 'The Wine Breath'.

Shaking off Joyce's all pervasive presence while at the same time paying him homage only came about for McGahern, however, through Flaubert's 'atrocious

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<sup>21</sup> Flaubert to Louise Colet, 14-15 August 1846, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert 1830-1857*, trans. Francis Steegmuller (London: Faber and Faber, 1981). Quoted in Scarlett Baron, *'Strandentwining Cable': Joyce, Flaubert and Intertextuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Baron, *'Strandentwining Cable'*, 11.

labour'. One of the major reasons, one suspects, for the self-suppression of McGahern's first (unpublished) novel, 'The End or the Beginning of Love', is that it owed too much, too clearly to *A Portrait of the Artist*. In his scrapping of this first attempt at a novel, McGahern was notably repeating Joyce's own actions in giving *Stephen Hero* the flames only to see the work rise again through the much more polished, more cautiously oblique and less autobiographical *Portrait*. Both 'The End or the Beginning' and *A Portrait* are novels about growing up. In both cases they focus on an Irish Catholic boy -- Joyce's Stephen and McGahern's Jude -- as he struggles to overcome the obstacles set in his path by country, church and family.

There have been many such novels of adolescent growth over the years, we even have a name for them in the *bildungsroman*, but where Joyce and McGahern most strikingly intersect in their approach to the genre is over the question of sexual desire and its incompatibility with Catholic reverence and restraint. Descriptions of a young man's lust such as the one quoted in the epigraph to this chapter meant that *A Portrait* struggled to find a publisher. One of the most astute figures in the London publishing scene, Edward Garnett, in his reader's report for Duckworth's, with whom Joyce had hoped to have the book published, rejected the manuscript both for its shapelessness and its deliberate offensiveness: "the author must revise it and let us see it again. It is too discursive, formless, unrestrained, and ugly things, ugly words, are too prominent; indeed at times they seem to be shoved in one's face, on purpose,

unnecessarily".<sup>23</sup> Thanks to the good offices of Ezra Pound, Joyce did not have to wait too much longer to see the novel in print. McGahern, almost half a century later, must have felt himself on safer ground with a passage such as the following from 'The End or the Beginning':

He would take a nun: his mind laid her out on the red carpets of the altar [sic] and fiercely his mind created the shimmering, immaculate purity of her flesh and he took her body fiercely, the blood rushing madly towards her pale cheeks. But his body sickened from the orgy, his mind revolted at the last, terrible blasphemy. He was to be a priest; his voice, promising his mother to say Mass for her, her dying face on the pillows returned out of the sickroom. How could he raise his hand over her haunting image? How could he be a priest, now? Had he put down his soul among the stinking and burning damned, and would his dying face, looking with tortured yearning through the white vapours of the fiery furnace, reproach him with his sins, dwelling on the individual ugliness of each crime; he had thrown her and the blessedness of heaven away. Would her [missing word] be lost to him for ever, and ever?

He went to the drawer and took a small memorial card from his prayer book, a black tassel hanging from her. It was a wedding photograph: her face was beautiful beneath the dark-brown hair; a white frock, with a loose hanging neck lay upon her shoulders; she smiled with a peculiar twist of the mouth out of the dark of the card. Jude softly whispered the verse beneath:

A hard flame burned in him:

I will never sin again. I will never think of a woman Mammy, pray for me. I swear to do this before God.<sup>24</sup>

This passage is pure Joyce – a combination of *A Portrait's* celebrated, and frequently copied, visions of hell summoned up for Stephen at his school retreat to St Francis

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<sup>23</sup> See Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 403-4.

<sup>24</sup> McGahern papers, P71/2. Handwritten section of 'The End or the Beginning of Love', 16 pp (n. d.).

Xavier, and the slightly older Stephen's guilt over failing to pray for his dying mother that pervades *Ulysses* from start to finish.

The struggle between a vibrant, physical life as represented by sexual passion and carnal fulfillment, and the 'death in life' represented by a turn to the priesthood runs through a great deal of McGahern and is central to *The Dark*, the novel that owes most to the abandoned 'End or Beginning'. The Joycean echoes are still strongly there in *The Dark*, both in theme and in occasional prose, but not as unreservedly as in the early unpublished efforts:

Hell was there too, the fires and crawling worms, sweat and curses, the despair of for ever. How would the innocent afternoons on the river look from hell, the brush strokes through the black hair in the mirror. Was it better never to know happiness so that there'd be no anguish of loss. A priest could have no anguish, he'd given up happiness, his fixed life moving in the calm of certainty to its end, cursed by no earthly love or longing, all had been chosen years before.<sup>25</sup>

In those infernal worms one is, inevitably, brought back to the retreat of *A Portrait* and its focus on the infinite tortures of hell: "Just as in dead bodies works are engendered by putrefaction, so in the souls of the lost there arises a perpetual remorse from the putrefaction of sin, the sting of conscience, the worm, as Pope Innocent the Third calls it, of the triple sting."<sup>26</sup> And, as in *A Portrait*, the central character is tormented by the pull of lust, on the one hand, and religiosity on the other. In both novels thoughts of entering the priesthood are entertained and rejected.

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<sup>25</sup> John McGahern, *The Dark* (1965; London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 83-4.

<sup>26</sup> Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist*, 128-29.

If McGahern hoped that things had moved on in the half century since Garnett had rejected *A Portrait* for its obscenity, he was wrong: *The Dark* was banned by the Irish Censorship Board and became the last great *cause célèbre* of literary censorship in Ireland. More than enough has already been written about this important moment in McGahern's life.<sup>27</sup> There must have been at least part of him that expected the book to be banned. If Ireland in 1965 was no longer quite the Catholic theocracy it was at the time of the Eucharistic Congress some thirty years earlier, it was not yet ready for the sexual fantasies, teenage masturbation and clerical sexual abuse that are threaded through *The Dark*. Joyce left Ireland in 1912 for the very last time having failed to get *Dubliners* published in his native city. Travelling back to Trieste, he wrote the scabrous, if amusing, ballad 'Gas from a Burner' in which Ireland is roundly condemned for its treatment of art:

This lovely land that always sent  
Her writers and artists to banishment.<sup>28</sup>

McGahern, with even more concrete reasons than Joyce to feel aggrieved, left Ireland with a rueful shake of the head, rejected the idea of public protest, and headed for London a wounded, but far from defeated, man.

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<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Julia Carlson, *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>28</sup> James Joyce, 'Gas From a Burner', in Joyce, *The Critical Writings*, ed. Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann, fwd. Guy Davenport (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 243.



While *The Dark* would be the last McGahern novel in which Joyce would so clearly be a presence, he did not disappear entirely. In the early 1970s McGahern worked on a television version of the opening story of *Dubliners*, 'The Sisters'. Directed by Stephen Frears, and produced by Gavin Millar and Melvyn Bragg, it was broadcast as part of the 'Full House' series on BBC2 in February 1973. Though McGahern considered it a failure, one or two aspects of the adaptation are worth considering to gain a greater understanding of McGahern's artistic conversation with Joyce.<sup>29</sup> Rather than Great Britain Street (now Parnell Street) where Joyce placed the paralytic priest of his story, Father James Flynn, McGahern moved the action to "the small redbricked terraces of Dublin", typically "those behind Fairview Church".<sup>30</sup> This was a part of the city well known to McGahern and frequently used in his fiction, as, for instance, in 'Sierra Leone' and 'My Love, My Umbrella', a story to which I shall shortly return. Other changes considered by McGahern from the original story see him replace the sin of simony with that of heresy, and in particular Jansenist heresy, and the unnamed boy of Joyce becomes 'Stephen' in the adaptation, indicating that McGahern saw the boy of the story as a young Dedalus. Ultimately both Joyce's story and McGahern's adaptation of it are about clerical corruption and the paralysing effect that the Catholic church has had on Ireland. Both writers, while seeing and understanding the dark

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<sup>29</sup> I am grateful to Madeline McGahern for sharing her memories of this production.

<sup>30</sup> McGahern papers, P71/743. Handwritten draft of the script of *The Sisters* written on Colgate, Dept of English notepaper paginated 1-10 (n. d.), 1.

shadow cast by clerical power in Ireland, and both abandoning their faith, could come to an accommodation with it and use its charms, language and beauty to fortify and embellish their work.

Dublin's northside suburb of Fairview in which McGahern decides to set 'The Sisters' had been used by him for another, much more nuanced, Joycean adaptation a few years earlier in the story 'My Love, My Umbrella'. The title is an homage to Joyce's strange, fragmented, posthumously published meditation on unrequited love and lust, *Giacomo Joyce*, which ends thus:

Unreadiness. A bare apartment. Torbid [?Torpid] daylight. A long black piano: coffin of music. Poised on its edge a woman's hat, red-flowered, and umbrella, furled. Her arms: a casque, gules, and blunt spear on a field, sable.

Envoy: Love me, love my umbrella.<sup>31</sup>

This eccentric prose poem was written by Joyce in about 1912 while he lived and worked as an English teacher in Trieste, but was not known to a wider public until Richard Ellmann published it with Faber in 1968. The publication of the text coincides with McGahern's writing of 'My Love, My Umbrella' which first appeared in the *Nightlines* collection of 1970. Ellmann, in his introduction, describes *Giacomo Joyce* as a "love poem which is never recited, it is Joyce's farewell to a phase of his life, and his discovery of a new form of imaginative expression".

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<sup>31</sup> James Joyce, *Poems and Shorter Writings, including Epiphanies, Giacomo Joyce and 'A Portrait of the Artist'*, ed. Richard Ellmann, A. Walton Litz and John Whittier-Ferguson (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 241.

The title of McGahern's story is not the only overlap with *Giacomo Joyce*. When Ellmann writes about Joyce's hero and his "erotic commotion", or describes his "erratic, contorted introspection", he might just as accurately have been writing about the unnamed central character of McGahern's story.<sup>32</sup> 'My Love, My Umbrella' sees two unnamed characters engage in a brief and rather unsatisfactory love affair in which the man's umbrella becomes a fetishistic prop for their al fresco lovemaking. Because the woman lives in a boarding house, the couple are forced into exploring each other's bodies behind Fairview church where there is "a dead end overhung with old trees, and the street lights did not reach as far as the wall at its end". Here they have the first of several furtive encounters:

Our lips moved on the saliva of our mouths as I slowly undid the coat button. I tried to control the trembling so as not to tear the small white buttons of the blouse. Coat, blouse, brassière, as names of places on a road. I globed the warm soft breasts in hands. [...] Will she let me? I was afraid as I lifted the woollen skirt; and slowly I moved hands up the soft insides of the thighs, and instead of the 'No' I feared and waited for, the handle became a hard pressure as she pressed on my lips.

I could no longer control the trembling as I felt the sheen of the knickers, I drew them down to her knees, and parted the lips to touch the juices. She hung on my lips. She twitched as the fingers went deeper. She was a virgin.

'It hurts.' The cold metal touched my face, the rain duller on the sodden cloth by now.

'I won't hurt you,' I said, and pumped low between her thighs, lifting high the coat and skirt so that the seed fell free into the mud and rain, and after resting on each other's mouth I replaced the clothes.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Ellmann, 'Introduction' to *Giacomo Joyce*, in James Joyce, *Poems and Shorter Writings*, 221, 221, 227.

<sup>33</sup> John McGahern, 'My Love, My Umbrella', *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 61, 61-2.

In all of this there are several striking similarities with *Giacomo Joyce*. The female characters in both are virgins, and there is a preoccupation with descriptions of underclothes: "A skirt caught back by her sudden moving knee; a white lace edging of an underskirt lifted unduly; a leg-stretched web of stocking". Any reader familiar with *Ulysses* will catch echoes too of Leopold Bloom's masturbatory fantasies on Sandymount strand as he fixes his tired gaze on Gerty McDowell. While the 'seed' produced in 'My Love, My Umbrella' falls on stony ground -- or rain and mud to be precise -- Joyce's imagined climax, while remarkably similar to McGahern's, leads to more fertile territory:

She leans back against the pillowed wall: odalisque-featured in the luxurious obscurity. Her eyes have drunk my thoughts: and into the moist warm yielding welcoming darkness of her womanhood my soul, itself dissolving, has streamed and poured and flooded a liquid and abundant seed..... Take her now who will!<sup>34</sup>

While the fetishistic imagery of *Giacomo Joyce* engages McGahern's imagination in his composition of 'My Love, My Umbrella', it is to another Joycean tale of failed love that we must turn for profounder thematic parallels.

'My Love, My Umbrella' is, on first reading, a darkly comic tale about lust and the absurdities to which it will stretch, but a more sympathetic interpretation might see it as a meditation on human loss and loneliness. As the man and woman of the story draw closer, the man becomes afraid. He fears, in particular, the inevitable loss of freedom attendant upon parenthood, and the quiet, dull life of the suburbs. These

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<sup>34</sup> Joyce, *Poems and Shorter Writings*, 235, 239.

fears take hold of him and he allows the relationship to drift. Lying to his lover that he will ring her during the week after what he secretly intends to be their last encounter, he is in a state of ecstasy: "I was so clownishly elated that I threw the umbrella high in the air and laughing loudly caught it coming down". But within days his mood changes as he begins to realize his loss: "there was the exhilaration of staying free those first days; but it soon palled. In the empty room trying to read, while the trains went by at the end of the garden with its two apple trees and one pear, I began to realize I'd fallen more into the habit of her than I'd known". But now the tables have turned and when he begs his lover to return to him, all the power lies with her, and she rejects him. After one, final meeting when she agrees to see him more out of pity than affection he is left alone and broken:

The same night after pub-close I went -- driven by the urge that brings people back to the rooms where they once lived and no longer live -- and stood out of the street lamps under the trees where so often we had stood, in the hope that some meaning of my life or love would come, but the night only hardened about the growing absurdity of a man standing under an umbrella beneath the drip from the green leaves of the trees.

In lonely places such as this, death draws near: "Through my love it was the experience of my own future death I was passing through, for the life of the desperate equals the anxiety of death".<sup>35</sup>

There is much about this narrative of a lover and the abandonment of the safe happiness of a romantic relationship for unspecific, vaguely egotistical reasons that is

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<sup>35</sup> McGahern, 'My Love, My Umbrella', *Creatures of the Earth*, 65, 65, 68, 68.

strongly reminiscent of another of Joyce's stories, 'A Painful Case'. Here, the misanthropic Mr James Duffy abandons Mrs Sinico when he feels she is drawing too near and is desirous of more than he is prepared to give. Like the lovers of 'My Love, My Umbrella', Joyce's characters "met always in the evening and chose the most quiet quarters for their walks together". Like the man in McGahern's story, Mr Duffy realizes much too late what he has lost in letting the relationship fall away, and the narrative becomes by the end a kind of ghost story. Years after the end of the affair, he is reminded of what he has given up when reading in the newspaper an account of Mrs Sinico's lonesome death on a railway line: "he had done what seemed to him best. How was he to blame? Now that she was gone he understood how lonely her life must have been, sitting night after night alone in that room. His life would be lonely too until he, too, died, ceased to exist, became a memory -- if anyone remembered him".

In the final, heartbreaking paragraph of Joyce's story one sees a reflection of McGahern's lover beginning to realize, too late, what he has lost 'while the trains went by at the end of the garden with its two apple trees and one pear'. For Mr Duffy, "outcast from life's feast", the same despondency sets in amid the sounds of trains and shadows of trees:

He turned back the way he had come, the rhythm of the engine pounding in his ears. He began to doubt the reality of what memory told him. He halted under a tree and allowed the rhythm to die away. He could not feel her near him in the darkness nor her voice touch his ear. He waited for some minutes listening. He

could hear nothing: the night was perfectly silent. He listened again: perfectly silent. He felt that he was alone.<sup>36</sup>

The conversation between 'A Painful Case' and 'My Love, My Umbrella' is conducted in hushed tones. The unmistakeable indebtedness that was owed to Joyce by *The Dark* and even more strongly by its aborted forerunner, 'The End or the Beginning of Love', has disappeared, and in its place is a quieter but no less reverential homage.

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<sup>36</sup> James Joyce, *Dubliners* (1914; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 106, 112-13, 113-14.

## II

### **A Walking Mirror: Stendhal, Horace, Nietzsche**

Why, my good sir, a novel is a mirror journeying down the high road.

-- Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*



"With the growth of the intelligence", writes McGahern, "we learn to differentiate the pure from the impure. The tolerance of admitting that our temperaments are themselves limited. Stendhal & Chateaubriand. Byron & Keats".<sup>1</sup> The quote is drawn from a handwritten, undated fragment of non-fiction held in the McGahern Archive. The document consists of a list of numbered observations about reading and writing – my opening quote comes from number 6. Number 7, in its amalgam of Chesterton, Auden and Proust, is even more revealing in its consideration of literary influence and the sustaining power of a great tradition:

It is with contact with other minds that we sharpen our own  
Auden rephrasing Chesterton  
No man can lay claim to a full life unless he has broken bread with the great  
dead [...]  
Distinction and nobility consist, in the order of thought also, in a kind of  
freemasonry of customs, and in an inheritance of traditions<sup>2</sup>

That Stendhal (b. Henri Beyle 1783-1842), should make the list of writers from whom McGahern draws sustenance should not come as a surprise. One of the canonical figures of nineteenth-century French fiction of which McGahern was such an admirer, Stendhal makes glancing appearances throughout the Leitrim writer's oeuvre, and is directly if somewhat puzzlingly mentioned in *The Pornographer*:

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<sup>1</sup> McGahern Papers, P71/1289. Handwritten fragment of non-fiction, 2 pp (n. d.).

<sup>2</sup> McGahern Papers (P71/1289). The quote ending "an inheritance of traditions" is a favourite of McGahern's and is drawn from Marcel Proust's 1906 preface to John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*. See Proust, *On Reading Ruskin: Prefaces to La Bible d'Amiens and Sésame et les Lys with Selections from the Notes to the Translated Texts*, trans and ed. Jean Autret, William Burford and Philip J. Wolfe; int. Richard Macksey (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 125.

Maloney was at breakfast when I went into the Commercial. He probably had a hangover. He was in a sour mood.

"How did you find the local blooms?" I asked.

"This isn't Grenoble and I'm not Stendhal's uncle. Have some coffee? Tell me how you got your decorations."

"She had the child. I went to see her in London. She had a protector who beat me up."<sup>3</sup>

In this novel about sex, its representation and misrepresentation, the comment is likely a reference to an incident in Stendhal's childhood and to his uncle, Romain Gagnon, an incorrigible libertine, who covered the terrace of his house in Grenoble with an array of flowers. Stendhal fondly recalls looking at the stars with his uncle, surrounded by these flowers. He was close to his uncle, who also introduced him to libertine literature, and who presented an appealing alternative to the austere upbringing provided by his father and his grandfather.<sup>4</sup>

But it is on Stendhal's presence in *The Dark*, a novel published some fifteen years earlier, that this chapter will focus. An important influence on the young John McGahern's artistic development was the Dublin-born artist Paddy Swift, as he made clear in an essay of 1993.<sup>5</sup> Swift, along with his great friend, the poet and travel writer David Wright, began editing a London-based quarterly little magazine in the autumn of 1959, titled *X*. In 1961 it became the first forum for John McGahern's fiction when it

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<sup>3</sup> John McGahern, *The Pornographer* (1979; London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 286.

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Prof. Kate Marsh for sharing her expertise with me on young Stendhal.

<sup>5</sup> See John McGahern, 'The Bird Swift', in McGahern, *Love of the World*, ed. Stanley Van Der Ziel, int. Declan Kiberd (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 65-74.

published extracts from his still unpublished first novel 'The End or the Beginning of Love'. *X*, though not declaring its hand in any opening manifesto, was impatient, Francophile and unapologetically élitist in tone. It was suspicious of the Beats, supportive of Beckett, and reignited debates around classicism and romanticism that had not burned brightly in English periodical culture since the high days of T. S. Eliot's *Criterion* and John Middleton Murry's *Adelphi*.<sup>6</sup> In the summer of 1960, as McGahern and Swift drank together in the bars and restaurants of London, the merits of the classical versus the romantic writer were central to their thinking. There is a memorable description towards the end of McGahern's essay on Swift of the two of them disagreeing on this issue via the figure of Stendhal:

As we sat in the heat and noise and drank gin, the talk turned to Stendhal – *Naples and Florence, Memoirs of an Egotist*, the Journals. 'It would be obscene to be anything but a romantic in this conformist age,' Paddy asserted, and I disagreed, thinking it was more a matter of temperament and background.<sup>7</sup>

Swift had set his Romantic stall out in the June issue of *X* in an article about the poetry of his friend and fellow member of the *X* circle, George Barker. "Central to the Romantic view", he wrote, "since it relies heavily on the operations of personality, is its notion of the character and function of the poet. In this it tends to exalt the poet as creator, as opposed to his role as workman." And, again, Stendhal comes to the front of his thinking: "It was in a Europe haunted by the intellect of Lord Byron, and already

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<sup>6</sup> For a lively account of this debate, see David Goldie, *A Critical Difference: T. S. Eliot and John Middleton Murry in English Literary Criticism, 1919-1928* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> McGahern, *Love of the World*, 74.

uneasy about the impending horrors of Democracy, that this idea of the poet was born. By Europe I mean the conscious European mind (i.e. Stendhal, Delacroix, etc.)”.<sup>8</sup> In the following issue of *X*, Swift – using the pseudonym ‘James Mahon’ – again tipped his hat at the father of French realism, though on this occasion in admiration for his work as an art critic (work read and admired by both Swift and McGahern) rather than as a novelist:

It is tempting but neither useful nor desirable to regard art criticism as merely a pornography in the world of painting. It may be this; but it can be something more.

It is not an accident that *Histoire de la Peinture en Italie* remains readable; as Cézanne found it, who read it many times, or Baudelaire, who borrowed from it. This pleasant and incisive book provides us with an example of a kind of critical writing which is illuminating, instructive, and wholly delectable. And its importance does not depend on the validity of Stendhal’s comparative judgements. It is an eccentric personal work full of specific observations and we get the sensation of being in the presence of a temperament and an intelligence excited by pictures. This is an exciting experience.<sup>9</sup>

Again, two issues later, *X* is writing admiringly about Ezra Pound’s enthusiasm for Stendhal as a stylist and thinker: “As for Stendhal’s stricture, if we can have a poetry that comes as close as prose, *por donner une idée claire et precise*, let us have it”.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Patrick Swift, ‘Prolegomenon to George Barker’, *X: Volume One 1960-61*, ed. David Wright and Patrick Swift (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1961), 215.

<sup>9</sup> James Mahon, ‘The Painter in the Press’, *X: Volume One 1960-61*, 299. ‘James Mahon’ was the name of Patrick Swift’s maternal grandfather. See the entry for Patrick Swift in James McGuire and James Quinn (ed.), *Dictionary of Irish Biography: From the earliest times to the year 2002*, vol. 9 (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 201-02.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Cronin, ‘A Question of Modernity’, *X: A Quarterly Review*, vol. one, no. four (October 1960), 284.

Whether McGahern became a devotee of Stendhal via the matrix of *X*, or whether he had already begun to pay attention to him before the London summer of 1960 we cannot say, but certainly the magazine and its circle did much to stoke an enthusiasm that would last a lifetime.<sup>11</sup>

Three years before that seminal summer, Frank O'Connor, Ireland's most respected short story writer of his day, and one of its more influential literary critics and thinkers, had published a book of essays on the novel which it is likely McGahern read as he worked his way voraciously through the canon. The book, *The Mirror in the Roadway* (1957), was named in homage to Stendhal's most celebrated book, *The Red and the Black* (1830), and describes the biographical and psychic make-up of the French master in terms that could not but have echoed loudly in McGahern's mind:

what he wished to do is only very doubtfully the business of the novelist, since he looked on the novel merely as [...] a new means of exploring his own ill-balanced character. [...] Many of his later difficulties can be traced to his mother's death, for it threw the responsibility of his upbringing on people whom he hated. He indulged himself in fantasies of illegitimacy and in adolescent self-abuse, neither of which would have done him much harm but for the extraordinary sensitiveness of his character.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Swift's biographer lists his favourite writers as Beckett, Stendhal, Goethe, Kafka, Proust, Kierkegaard and Baudelaire -- it is a list that would tally closely with McGahern's. See Veronica Jane O'Mara, 'A Short Life of Patrick Swift 1927-1983', in O'Mara (ed.), *PS... of course: Patrick Swift 1927-1983* (Oysterhaven: Gandon Books, 1993), 66.

<sup>12</sup> Frank O'Connor, *The Mirror in the Roadway: A Study of the Modern Novel* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1957), 43-4.

Young Mahoney, the adolescent hero of McGahern's *The Dark*, is a close approximation to this portrait of the young, motherless, masturbation-addicted Stendhal.

In the same month that Patrick Swift's article citing Stendhal in his defence of Romanticism appeared in *X*, McGahern wrote to the Belfast novelist and short story writer Michael McLaverty, confessing an admiration for Stendhal's journals while avowing that he could not keep one himself as "it would seem too self-conscious".<sup>13</sup> But if he was chary of mimicking Stendhal's personal habits, he was keen to pay homage to his aesthetic practice. In his essay 'The Solitary Reader', McGahern describes a crucial moment that any serious reader must reach if the base metal of storytelling is to become the glittering gold of literature:

A time comes when the way we read has to change drastically or stop, though it may well continue as an indolence or pastime or drug. This change is linked with our growing consciousness, consciousness that we will not live forever and that all human life is essentially in the same fix. We have to discard all the tenets that we have been told until we have succeeded in thinking them out for ourselves. We find that we are no longer reading books for the story and that all stories are more or less the same story; and we begin to come on certain books that act like mirrors. What they reflect is something dangerously close to our own life and the society in which we live.

A new, painful excitement enters the way we read. We search out these books, and these books only, the books that act as mirrors.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> John McGahern to Michael McLaverty, in John Killen (ed.), *Dear Mr McLaverty – The Literary Correspondence of John McGahern and Michael McLaverty 1959-1980* (Belfast: The Linen Hall Library, 2006), 24.

<sup>14</sup> John McGahern, 'The Solitary Reader', in *Love of the World*, 90.

So, we have the book as mirror. This motif has become a commonplace of literary criticism of course, and a familiar trope of realism in particular, from Plato's *The Republic* where the philosopher says that everything can be produced "provided that, a mirror in hand, you consent to walk it in every direction" to Hamlet's pronouncement that "the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature" (Hamlet, III, 2), to Stephen Dedalus's celebrated description of Irish art as "the cracked looking-glass of a servant" to McGahern's own "Medusa's mirror" of 'The Image'.<sup>15</sup> Incidentally, that flawed mirror of Joyce's is twice mentioned in *The Dark* as it makes up part of the furniture in the guest bedroom of Fr Gerald Malone's rural Cavan house (uncracked in one early draft – that McGahern should crack it later ends any residual doubt, I think, about his Joycean subtext). We shall return to Cavan shortly as it is in this section of the novel that Stendhal most clearly comes to the surface.

Immediately after McGahern's description of this key moment in the life of the reader he states: "That change happened to me in the Dublin of the 1950s". Denis Sampson has done some very useful sleuthing on that period of McGahern's development and has begun to consider what was being published then, what was on

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<sup>15</sup> The mirror is also an important presence in W. H. Auden's collection of essays, beloved of McGahern, *The Dyer's Hand*: "Every man carries with him through life a mirror, as unique and impossible to get rid of as his shadow". See Auden, *The Dyer's Hand* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 93. On Stendhal and mirrors, see Stirling Haig, *The Red and the Black* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), *passim*.

show in the theatres and cinemas at this crucial period. Richard Ellmann's monumental biography of Joyce, published in 1958, is one book that would have become important for anyone – and especially anyone Irish – interested in literature at this time.<sup>16</sup> Another, as I have already tentatively suggested, is O'Connor's *The Mirror in the Roadway*. I do not want to go too far down that roadway, and nor is it necessary for the purposes of my argument but, nonetheless, it is worth considering who McGahern was turning to as a tutor at this time. Though McGahern was not much influenced stylistically by the heady mix of romance, realism and farce that marks out Stendhal – where the tide of the eighteenth century is ebbing and that of the nineteenth begins to rise – there are a couple of specific instances in McGahern where I think he is directly drawing down from *The Red and the Black*. Primarily, one sees this homage taking place in *The Dark*.

The novel with which *The Dark* is most frequently compared is, of course, Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. There are, as my previous chapter has suggested, very good reasons for this emphasis: both books recount the confused spiritual awakening of young men in a Catholic-dominated and sexually repressed Ireland; both see their central characters tormented by the opposing pulls of carnal desire and religious devotion. But *The Red and the Black* forms perhaps just as significant a background text for *The Dark*: each is a classic instance of the

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<sup>16</sup> See Denis Sampson, *Young John McGahern: Becoming a Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), *passim*.



*bildungsroman*, and each one focusses on the corruption of the priesthood (though there are intelligent, religious priests in both) and are, in part, about the decision of a young man as to what sort of life to lead in order to be true to the soul. Both young Mahoney of *The Dark* and Julien Sorel of *The Red and the Black* are sensitive, bookish country boys harassed by brutish, anti-intellectual, penny pinching fathers; both consider seriously a life in the Church before definitively rejecting the priesthood as an option. There are smaller, but no less significant, likenesses: Julien's father runs a sawmill; though Mahoney Snr is a small farmer rather than a sawyer, the whine of saws is an ever present in McGahern, from stories like 'Christmas' and 'Why We're Here' to a novel like *The Pornographer*. And, more exactly still in the case of the traffic between *The Red and the Black* and *The Dark*, Horace and the ability to recite and translate his Odes becomes an important mark of intellectual progress and social advancement for Julien and young Mahoney alike.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the similarities in subject matter and theme, McGahern makes one or two nods to Stendhal as a stylist. Famously influential on the history of European realism, Stendhal, like McGahern, would have been much happier to be described as a classical writer. A writer should be, he wrote in his most important treatise on literary style, *Racine et Shakespeare*, "romantic in his ideas, but classical in

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<sup>17</sup> In a valedictory poem for Patrick Swift, David Wright recalls Horace as one of his friend's artistic heroes: "No cause for sadness, You reader of Aquinas, And clear Horace". See David Wright, 'Images for a Painter, i.m. Patrick Swift 1927-1983', in Wright, *Poems and Versions* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), 40.

his style", a principle he follows in his novel, which is a highly romantic story, narrated with the measure and the reticence of a classic.<sup>18</sup> In common with McGahern, Stendhal is highly allusive, choosing to begin each chapter with an epigraph, sometimes serious, sometimes fake and humorous.

What has become perhaps Stendhal's most famous line forms part of one such epigraph to chapter 13 of *The Red and the Black*: "A novel is a mirror passing down a road." Stendhal expands on that celebrated mirror epigraph later in the novel in Chapter 19 of Part 2, titled 'The Italian Opera'. The quote in question forms part of a metafictional, parenthetical aside:

Why, my good sir, a novel is a mirror journeying down the high road. Sometimes it reflects to your view the azure blue of heaven, sometimes the mire in the puddles on the road below. And the man who carries the mirror in his pack will be accused by you of being immoral! His mirror reflects the mire, and you blame the mirror! Blame rather the high road on which the puddle lies, and still more the inspector of roads and highways who lets the water stand there and the puddle form.<sup>19</sup>

McGahern is indebted to this description in the following passage in which young Mahoney questions his sister Joan about the abuse that she is suffering at the hands of her boss, Ryan, a draper in the small town which forms part of Fr Gerald's Cavan

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Margaret R. B. Shaw, 'Introduction', in Stendhal, *Scarlet and Black: A Chronicle of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. and int. Margaret R. B. Shaw (1830; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 14.

<sup>19</sup> Stendhal, *Scarlet and Black*, 93, 365-6.

parish. She is surprised when he tells her that they are both to go home the following day and that he has decided against a life in the priesthood:

“Are you not going to be a priest?”

“I don’t know, I don’t think so. What made you think I was ever going to be a priest anyhow?”

“You were always very quiet or something,” and that caused you to start, you didn’t think yourself very quiet.

You didn’t know very much about yourself so. The mirror was before you now, temptation to probe to see other pictures of you in her mind, but it was no use, she had her life as well as you, every life had too much importance and unimportance to be only a walking mirror for another.<sup>20</sup>

Here, Joan is the mirror rather than any book, but I am inclined to see in these mirrors, as they travel along the roadway, a subtle nod from one writer to another. That *The Dark*, on publication in 1965, should become exactly the kind of mirror described by Stendhal – acting as a barb or jolt to a complacent and corrupt post-revolutionary society – is coincidental, though just as Stendhal subtitled *The Red and the Black* ‘a chronicle of the nineteenth century’, McGahern’s book is also a commentary on a failed society dominated by a sexually repressive church and a corrupt bourgeoisie.

The scene in which a narrator’s sister is molested by her employer in a small country town is one that had been percolating in McGahern’s mind since at least the late 1950s when he had drafted ‘The End or the Beginning of Love’. It is instructive to look at the drafts for this prentice work in order to see one way in which McGahern becomes a more subtly writerly novelist as he matures, a writer who will lean on other

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<sup>20</sup> John McGahern, *The Dark* (1965; London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 94.

writers and other texts, someone who wishes to be part of the great tradition through allusion, quotation and homage. The scene as it is described in the unpublished novel is in content very similar to its counterpart in *The Dark*. It is, however, more emotionally raw, so much so that the writing changes markedly in register and texture, and suffers as a result. In this case the boy narrator is named Hugh and his sister is Josie:

He dragged it laboriously out of her. She was nothing more than a skivvy. Nowadays, they didn't make even the pretence of letting her serve in the shop. When the two daughters were on holidays from the convent she had to rise to bring them their breakfast in bed. Paul never left her alone. He put out his foot to trip her when she passed him. One night as she knitted in the dusk on the sofa, he had crept up to her and slipped his hand over her shoulder and inside her clothes to the breasts. [...] The confession dragged. Sometimes the words came on a rush of rage; then, he had to force and coax her to speak.

"The black greasy bastards," he muttered when she finished. His fingers stiffened for the milky suavity of Paul's throat. A desire to murder took possession of him. Like pictures they flashed before the enraged eyes of his mind: the flabby breasted mother with her piggy eyes, the stench of the stalled animal about her; her cowed, shuffling husband; the spoiled, meanly lecherous son; the puss-oozing faces of the daughters that would clean to allow them to marry and breed more of their kind.<sup>21</sup>

The hate-filled power of this passage gives us a glimpse of a younger, less honed writer than the scrupulous McGahern to whom we have become accustomed. And that rawness is also evident in less overt ways, as in the discussion with the narrator's sister when he confesses that he has given up thoughts of being a priest:

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<sup>21</sup> McGahern Papers, P71/8. Typescript draft of 'The End or The Beginning of Love', paginated pp 1-304 (n. d.), 151-2.

"You're not going to be a priest..." she echoed wonderingly.  
"Why?" he asked with a sudden laugh.  
"I don't know. Everybody thought that you would be a priest..."  
"And did you?"  
The girl hesitated: "I don't know. You always seemed very quiet. You weren't like the other boys at school..."  
He suppressed a desire to see more of his reflection and remained silent, tinkering with a daisy.<sup>22</sup>

This is very similar to the conversation as it takes place in *The Dark*, but the Stendhal allusion is absent. McGahern chose not to go ahead with the publication of 'The End of the Beginning of Love'. That an unpublished writer in his mid-twenties should have the maturity to put a brake on his publishing career in this way is admirable, putting one in mind, as I have suggested in my previous chapter, of the Joyce who realized that *Stephen Hero* broke Flaubert's (and subsequently McGahern's) rule about the need for an invisible author.

Besides the use of Stendhal's mirror, there is another, more precise overlap between *The Dark* and *The Red and the Black*. As part of his Leaving Certificate studies young Mahoney is taking Latin, and we see him trying to translate an Horation ode on the bus to Fr Gerald's house. Latin was then, pre-Vatican Two, still the universal language of the church and would have been required of any boy going on to study for the priesthood. Chapter 11 of *The Dark* begins with a six-line italicized Latin quote from Horace's ode 'A Call to Pleasure':

*Cur non sub alta vel platano vel hac  
pinu iacentes sic temere et rosa*

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<sup>22</sup> McGahern Papers, P71/8, 176.

*canos odorati capillos  
dum licet, Assyriaque nardo  
potamus uncti ? dissipat Euius  
curas edaces.*

It delights Mahoney to be able to translate this “whether from the satisfaction, it seemed to make meaning enough, or because it evoked a beautiful life and way”:

Why should we not lie stretched carelessly under that pinetree or the tall plane, and scent our white hair with roses while we may, and anointed with Syrian spikenard let us drink? Bacchus drives eating cares away.

“Horace wasn’t easy”, he thinks to himself, “he was for the *Honours*. So he laboured on mechanically through the notes and text.”<sup>23</sup>

Why does McGahern choose to focus so particularly on this one Leaving Cert dilemma above all others? For Julien Sorel, too, a mastery of Horace is crucial to his progress in life. This ability comes to the fore first in a chapter titled ‘The First Step Forward’ when Julien is undergoing examination at the grim, prison-like seminary in Besançon and is attempting to weave his way through the bitter factional politics that pervade the place:

At the end of one session, however, in which matters relating to the Fathers of the Church came up, an astute examiner, after questioning Julien on Saint Jerome and his passion for Cicero, went on to speak of Horace, Virgil, and other profane writers. Unknown to his companions, Julien had learnt a great number of passages from these authors off by heart. Carried away by his success, he forgot where he was, and, in response to reiterated requests from the examiner, recited several of Horace’s odes and gave lively paraphrases of them. After letting him give himself away for twenty minutes, the examiner suddenly changed

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<sup>23</sup> McGahern, *The Dark*, 60-61.

countenance and reproached him acidly for the time he had wasted on such profane studies and the vain or criminal ideas they had put into his head.

Thus Julien's recitation of Horace sees him come last in the class – but later in the chapter, as so often happens in the book, this perceived vice becomes a virtue when he impresses the Bishop of Besançon with his ability to recite Horace. This ability proves crucial in the Bishop's promotion of Julien and his next big step up in the world to the household of the Marquis de la Mole. The second half of the novel recounts Julien's adventures in this aristocratic household and how he comes to eventual ruin via his seduction of the Marquis' daughter. Early in his stay with the Marquis, Horace again comes to Julien's aid and sets him on his way in the world:

The Marquis must have mentioned the type of education Julien had received, for one of the guests began to tackle him on the subject of Horace. It was precisely by talking of Horace, thought Julien, that I managed to impress the Bishop of Besançon. Apparently these people don't know any other author. From that moment, he became master of himself.<sup>24</sup>

Julien, like young Mahoney, has chosen the life of the world and the flesh over a religious life. That choice is at the heart of *The Dark* and is encapsulated in the Ode translated on the Cavan bus.

In thinking about Horace and this particular ode, one is also led briefly and tantalizingly to Friedrich Nietzsche. Paddy Swift, as well as looking towards Stendhal

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<sup>24</sup> Stendhal, *Scarlet and Black*, 213, 258.

and Aquinas in his essay on George Barker, quotes the father of existentialism: "Nietzsche has said 'at the heart of every philosophy is the moral and the moral is man'."<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche was an admirer of Stendhal's, describing him in *Beyond Good and Evil* as a free spirit, and "this last great psychologist".<sup>26</sup> McGahern, Nietzsche and Stendhal were all pessimistic about the impact of knowledge on man. For McGahern, this pessimism shines through in one of his favourite aphorisms, a quote from a bonesetter friend of his: "Life is a shaky venture... if you think about it". For Stendhal it becomes the title to Chapter 19, Part 1 of *The Red and the Black*: "To Think is to Suffer". And for Nietzsche it comes as aphorism 109 of his book *Human, All Too Human*: "Sorrow is knowledge".<sup>27</sup> This aphorism forms part of section three of the book which is titled 'The Religious Life' and which, it is likely, was known to McGahern, and became an influence on his thinking and on his composition of *The Dark*:

How gladly one would exchange the false claims of priests – that there is a God who demands the good from us, who is guardian and witness of each act, each moment, each thought, who loves us and wants the best for us in every misfortune – how gladly one exchange these claims for truths which would be just as salutary, calming, and soothing as those errors! But there are no such truths; at the most, philosophy can oppose those errors with other metaphysical fictions (basically also untruths). But the tragic thing is that we can no longer believe those dogmas of religion and metaphysics, once we have the method of truth in our hearts and heads, and yet on the other hand, the development of mankind has made us so delicate, sensitive, and ailing that we need the most potent kind of cures and comforts – hence arises the danger that man might bleed

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<sup>25</sup> Swift, 'Prolegomenon to George Barker', 216.

<sup>26</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human*, parts 1 and 2; *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern and Paul V. Cohn, int. Ray Furness (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2008), 547.

<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human*, parts 1 and 2; *Beyond Good and Evil*, 71.



to death from the truth he has recognised. [...] There is no better cure for such cares than to conjure up the festive frivolity of Horace, at least for the worst hours and eclipses of the soul, and with him say to yourself:

quid aeternis minorem  
consiliis animum fatigas?  
cur non sub alta vel platano vel hac  
pinu jacentes<sup>28</sup>

That Nietzsche and McGahern fall upon the very same Horatian quote to illustrate their point about the agonies involved in a turn away from a life of the world and the flesh may, of course, be coincidental. But when one delves some more into *Human, All Too Human*, the notion that it is an influence on McGahern's thought grows. Following the 37 aphorisms that form the 'Religious Life' section come the 78 aphorisms of a section titled 'From the Soul of Artists and Writers'. All over this part of the book are observations that mirror McGahern's aesthetic outlook. So, for instance, aphorism 150 'Infusion of soul into art' argues that "Art raises its head where religions decline" – one is put in mind of McGahern's comment to Michael McLaverty that *The Dark* was, if anything, "a religious work".<sup>29</sup> Or aphorism 155 'Belief in Inspiration' which rejects the romantic temper for the classical:

The artist who separates less rigorously, likely to rely on his imitative memory, can in some circumstances become a great improviser; but artistic improvisation stands low in relation to artistic thoughts earnestly and laboriously chosen. All great men were great workers, untiring not only in invention but also in rejecting, sifting, reforming, arranging.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human*, parts 1 and 2; *Beyond Good and Evil*, 71-2.

<sup>29</sup> In Killen (ed.), *Dear Mr McLaverty*, 42.

<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human*, parts 1 and 2; *Beyond Good and Evil*, 101.

One returns to McGahern's jottings and his passionately held belief that 'No man can lay claim to a full life unless he has broken bread with the great dead'. In engaging with Stendhal, Horace and Nietzsche he is doing just that.

### III

#### **One lone paperback: Leo Tolstoy and Religious Sensibility**

From them she went as a housemaid in the family of the district police-officer, but only stayed three months because the police-officer, a man of fifty, began to pester her with his attentions, and once when he was being particularly insistent she lost her temper, called him a fool and an old devil, and gave him such a push in the chest that he fell. She was dismissed for her rudeness.<sup>31</sup>

– Leo Tolstoy, *Resurrection*

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<sup>31</sup> L. N. Tolstoy, *Resurrection* (1900; rpb. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), 24.

“He looks like something out of a Russian novel” – so says Robert Booth about Bill Evans in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*.<sup>32</sup> Booth is a well spoken Ulsterman, a literary gent with a double first from Oxford, clearly modelled on McGahern’s first editor at Faber, Charles Monteith, to whom he dedicates *Nightlines*. Bill Evans is a neighbour to the Ruttledges, a farm labourer and product of Ireland’s shameful past of incarceration and mistreatment of its poor, vulnerable and abandoned. Far from being a fictional character, as Booth would have it, Ruttledge knows, in his riposte, that such men are all too common in the Irish countryside:

He’s all ours, completely home-grown and mad alive. They were scattered all over the country when I was young. Those with English accents came mostly from Catholic orphanages in Liverpool. The whole business wasn’t a million miles from the slave trade.<sup>33</sup>

But while Ruttledge might want to pull Booth up for putting this real, downtrodden man into a literary frame, there is also a kind of self-referencing going on here, with McGahern conscious of the many parallels between the Ireland of his time and that narrated by the celebrated nineteenth-century Russian realists, Turgenev, Tolstoy and Chekhov.

Though McGahern admired all of these writers a great deal and is sometimes rather lazily described as ‘the Irish Chekhov’ (a journalistic term also frequently

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<sup>32</sup> John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002; London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 163.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

applied to Brian Friel), it is to Tolstoy I would wish to turn to consider his greatest debt to the Russians. Tolstoy is the only writer from whom McGahern has borrowed a text *tout court* and adapted it for his own purposes – in this case to create his one published play *The Power of Darkness* (1991). The introduction to that work makes clear what McGahern sees as the parallels between the Ireland he knows and the Russia described by Tolstoy:

*The Power of Darkness* [...] is uncannily close to the moral climate in which I grew up. The old fear of famine was confused with terror of damnation. The confusion and guilt and plain ignorance that surrounded sex turned men and women into exploiters and adversaries.

It was a deeply unhealthy, spirit-sapping world that had not, even as McGahern wrote these words in the 1990s, gone away:

Amid all this, the sad lusting after respectability, sugar-coated with sanctimoniousness and held together by a thin binding of religious doctrine and ceremony, combined to form a very dark and explosive force that, generally, went inwards and hid. For anybody who might imagine this to be a description of a remote and dark age, I refer them to the findings of the Kerry Babies Tribunal in 1985.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> John McGahern, 'Introduction', *The Power of Darkness* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), vii. 'The Kerry Babies' was a notorious murder case that dominated the Irish media in the mid-1980s and involved the premature deaths of two babies – one by stabbing – in County Kerry followed by a botched police investigation. Certain similarities with Tolstoy's play are striking.

Today, with regular news of mass graves located at ‘mother and baby’ homes in Tuam, Cork, Dublin and elsewhere, there are still disturbing truths to be revealed behind Ireland’s recent history.

That withdrawn and repressive country in which he grew to manhood fascinated McGahern, and when the BBC approached him in the early 1970s to write a radio adaptation of Tolstoy’s *The Power of Darkness* (1886), he saw a way to come to grips with a sense of his own country’s dim and tragic failure. McGahern had long been a fan of Tolstoy’s work, particularly of stories like ‘The Death of Ivan Ilyitch’ and ‘Family Happiness’.<sup>35</sup> While it is easy to see why something like ‘Ivan Ilyitch’, with its slow, stark examination of mortality and meaninglessness, would appeal to McGahern, it is difficult to understand -- apart from some sociohistorical similarities between Russia and Ireland -- what it was about Tolstoy’s play that so attracted McGahern in the first place. He admits in the 1991 introduction to *The Power of Darkness* that he was very surprised to find out when the BBC first approached him that Tolstoy had ever written a play. “Most of Tolstoy’s fiction was by then part of my mind”, he wrote, “but I was unaware that he had written for the theatre. In fact, I had somehow assumed that he looked on the theatre as frivolous.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See John McGahern, ‘Introduction’ to *The Power of Darkness* (2005), *Love of the World: Essays*, ed. Stanley van der Ziel, int. Declan Kiberd (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 283.

<sup>36</sup> John McGahern, *The Power of Darkness* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), vii.

In Tolstoy's play, an old peasant farmer and a newborn baby are murdered by family members in order to improve their own material position among their fellow peasants. As the title of the play suggests, darkness wins out, though it concludes with a public confession by the young man, Nikita, around whom much of the grim action revolves. It is, frankly, not a very good play, and has none of the searing insight and subtlety of Tolstoy's great fiction. Having first begun adapting the play in 1972, McGahern was never entirely happy with his work, and continued to return to it for the rest of his life. In 1991 it became his sole drama to be staged and published. At The Abbey theatre in the autumn of 1991 it was not a success and was derided by many of the critics. The *Irish Independent* was especially harsh:

Things are fine, and reminiscent of the old Abbey kitchen tragedy, until the farmer is dispatched. But a credibility crack then appears in relation to both characters and storyline, and long before Act 5 is reached, it has become a chasm. The play slides downhill, swinging from loud melodrama to unintentional farce, and the deeper layers of relevance to the broken, soulless world it purports to portray become increasingly fudged.<sup>37</sup>

Given its melodramatic nature, what was the attraction of the play to McGahern? Why work on a drama full of murder and mayhem when nothing else he had ever written up to that point bore any resemblance to this type of approach? Prior to this, McGahern had been a devotee of Flaubert's omnipotent and invisible author-God or of Joyce's scrupulous meanness. But there is nothing scrupulous about *The Power of*

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Christopher Murray, 'The "fallen world" of *The Power of Darkness*', *The John McGahern Yearbook*, vol. 2 (2009), 86.

*Darkness* where strong words, strong emotions and over the top actions reign. It would seem that McGahern saw drama as a totally different literary form to the novels and short stories he so successfully brought into the light. As a genre, it would not have to be forced into the same sly reticence as fiction and could be allowed greater freedom and rapidity of revelation. The idea of the solitary reader lost in a book, so treasured by McGahern, could be cast aside for the shorter lived intensity of a theatre audience.<sup>38</sup>

Sixteen years prior to the staging of *The Power of Darkness*, a similarly named novel, *The Dark*, had allowed the reader a telling glimpse into McGahern's conversation with Tolstoy. Behind both works is the shadow of a too-powerful and spiritually corrupt Catholic Church, and Tolstoy, a writer who always insisted on the need for art to be religious in its nature, becomes a natural touchstone. McGahern was familiar with Tolstoy's double essay on the overlap between the two realms, *What is Art? What is Religion?*, in which he concludes that what "is most essential for art" is "the guidance given by religious perception".<sup>39</sup> It is a not uncontroversial stance and was, in the swinging sixties of *The Dark*'s composition, deeply unfashionable. "Few readers", argues W. H. Auden, "find themselves able to accept Tolstoi's conclusions in *What is Art?*, but, once one has read the book, one can never ignore the questions Tolstoi raises".<sup>40</sup> It is likely that McGahern had read Tolstoy prior to lifting up Auden,

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<sup>38</sup> See John McGahern, 'The Solitary Reader', *Love of the World: Essays*, 87-95.

<sup>39</sup> Lyof N. Tolstoi, *What is Art? What is Religion?* (1899; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), 167.

<sup>40</sup> W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and other essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 9.



though the English poet's critical essays as collected in *The Dyer's Hand* (1963) became a great McGahern favourite.

A broad hint at the need to consider Tolstoy's theological worldview is dropped mid-way through *The Dark* when young Mahoney has come to spend time during the summer holidays at the home of Fr Gerald, a rural parish priest and cousin of his late mother:

Once back in the room you had the pure day on your hands, without distraction, except what you wished to be without, the fears and doubts and longings, coming and going.

The mahogany bookcase stood solid. Scott, Dickens, Canon Sheehan under glass: Wordsworth, Milton, volumes in brown leather, gold on the spines: staunch religious books, doctrine, histories of the church, books of sermons. One lone paperback, Tolstoy's *Resurrection* in a red and white Penguin, and you turned the small key to get it out, though you'd never heard of it or Tolstoy. It didn't look such a tomb as the others, there were more green leaves and living light of the day about it than the dust and memory of the others, it was too new for many dead hands to have turned the pages.<sup>41</sup>

*Resurrection* is the only book mentioned by name in *The Dark* and one of only a handful referenced directly throughout McGahern's oeuvre. Why did McGahern feel the need to drop it into Fr Gerald's bookcase at this crucial time in the psychic development of the book's young narrator?

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<sup>41</sup> John McGahern, *The Dark* (1965; London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 81.

The first thing to note about McGahern's decision is that, as always, it was coldly deliberate. *The Dark* is in part a revised version of McGahern's abandoned 'The End or the Beginning of Love', with many of the same or similar scenes and characters. In the earlier novel we again have a boy -- in this case named Hugh -- visiting a relation, Fr Gerald, with a view to exploring a possible call to a religious vocation.<sup>42</sup> Again, we see the priest's library, but in it is a very different sort of novel from Tolstoy:

He examined them under the glass: heavy, dusty volumes of theology and liturgy; some novels, complete editions of Scott, Dickens and Canon Sheehan; much poetry – Milton, Shakespeare, Burns, all the Romantics. Hugh took a copy of *Kenilworth* outside with him.

The morning was still sultry, the steady hum of insects more noticeable than the sharpness of the scattered birds, the air laden with the scent of flowers. Hugh found a seat in the apple garden that was partly concealed by overhanging fuchsias and began to finger the pages. The story didn't grip him; he read there at random.<sup>43</sup>

*Kenilworth* is a typical Walter Scott romance, set in Elizabethan England, which revolves around the secret, and ultimately doomed, marriage of two young aristocrats. It is difficult to see how it ties in any way into the plot of McGahern's novel or acts as a portal into any of its themes.

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<sup>42</sup> In some drafts the boy narrator's name is Jude. The practice of frequently changing characters' names remained a staple of McGahern's drafting practice throughout his career.

<sup>43</sup> McGahern papers, P71/8. Typescript draft of 'The End or The Beginning of Love', paginated 1-304 (n. d.), 166-67.

*Resurrection* (1900), on the other hand, has clear overlap with aspects of *The Dark's* plot. It was Tolstoy's last novel to be published, and is a stern attack on the Russian class system. It is unsparing in its criticism of the landholding, judicial and penal systems as well as of the Orthodox Church. The attack on the Church led to Tolstoy's formal excommunication on 22 February 1901, thus mirroring closely the fate of McGahern in the wake of *The Dark's* publication. While it is not difficult to see why a swashbuckler like Sir Walter Scott might find its way into the bookcase, it is odd that this most anticlerical book of Tolstoy's should be in Fr Gerald's library. Tolstoy said that in the novel he had "tried to portray various forms of love: exalted love, sensual love, and love of a still loftier kind, the love that enobles man, and in this form of love lies resurrection".<sup>44</sup> This is reminiscent of McGahern's statement that everything he writes, he writes out of love.

The core of the novel involves Prince Nekhlyudov's attempt to atone for his crimes against a young woman, Maslova (also known as Katusha more familiarly) who he seduced, impregnated and abandoned as a younger man. This misfortune leads to her being turned out of the service of Nekhlyudov's aunts and, after being exploited and harassed while in the employ of a district police officer, eventually giving birth in the home of an exploitative midwife who passes the child to a foundling hospital where it quickly dies. After this she goes into the service of a

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Rosemary Edmonds, 'Introduction', in L. N. Tolstoy, *Resurrection* (1900; rpb. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), 16.

forester who tries to sexually exploit her and later works for a lady whose older son also pesters her. Eventually she is befriended by a madam and enters into prostitution. This story of sexual exploitation holds striking parallels with the story of Joan -- young Mahoney's sister -- in *The Dark* who is sexually abused by her employer -- a subplot that meant a great deal to McGahern, and that he worked and reworked, as we have seen in the previous chapter.

Beyond this specific parallel, both *The Dark* and *Resurrection* are about the fall and rise of the individual soul. Both are profoundly religious novels that present the possibility of redemption in a cruel and loveless world. Chapter 14 of *The Dark*, in which Mahoney takes *Resurrection* from its case, is a version of the biblical Fall, in which Adam and Eve, in a thirst for knowledge, take an apple from the forbidden tree, leading to ruination and an ejection from Paradise. As in the Bible, the boy finds himself in an idyllic orchard. With him he carries *Resurrection*, and in his mind he is torn between thoughts of God and the priesthood on one hand, and sex and the world of the flesh on the other. The tempting, but ultimately deceitful, nature of the apples is writ large:

Six apple trees stood in the garden: three cookers, a honeycomb, Beauty of Bath, apples with the rust of pears and not ripe till the frosts. Jam-jars half full of syrup hung on twine from the branches. Wasps circled and circled the rims before they were tempted into the struggling froth of the dead and dying trapped in the sweetness. Some apples had fallen on the ground, shells of flaming colour, rotting brown of the flesh eaten far as the skins.

It is in beauty that the greatest danger lies: "The Beauty of Baths on the tree were cold and sharp, the teeth shivered once they sank in, there was nothing to do but throw it out of sight into the tall cocksfoot along the hedge". It is here, in this priest's garden, Tolstoy's unread book as prompt, that young Mahoney's fall from grace takes place, he knows that his religious vocation is not strong enough and that he will be drawn, instead, to what he calls "the ecstasy of destruction on a woman's mouth".<sup>45</sup>

Like young Mahoney, McGahern thought very seriously as a boy of entering the priesthood, but could not let go of the world. As an alternative he opted for what he felt was the next best thing: the life of a teacher. But there, too, the Church ruled with an iron grip, as he describes in an essay on his time in training college:

Attendance at daily Mass and evening Devotions was compulsory; and, extraordinary in a third-level institution, there wasn't a literary, historical, philosophical or – more surprisingly – even a Gaelic Society: but there were religious societies. We were being groomed as non-commissioned officers to the priests in the running of the different parishes throughout the country, cogs in an organizational wheel, secondary to the priest in all things, including education.<sup>46</sup>

That subordinate role is brought to terrifying life in his short story 'The Recruiting Officer' when the teacher-narrator, a former Christian Brother, witnesses the savage beating of young Walshe by the school manager Canon Reilly with a length of electric

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<sup>45</sup> McGahern, *The Dark*, 84-5, 84.

<sup>46</sup> John McGahern, 'Ní bheidh sibh ar ais: St Patrick's College Drumcondra', *Love of the World*, 115.

cable: "In a half-circle the beating moves, the boy trying to sink to the floor to escape the whistle and thud of the wire wrapping round his bare legs but held up by the arm, the boy's screaming and the heavy breathing of the priest filling the silence of the faces watching from the long benches in frightened fascination."<sup>47</sup> *The Dark* was the first major work of fiction in Ireland to shine a light on clerical sexual abuse, leading its author to be targeted by then Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, and dismissed from his teaching post in a Catholic boys' primary school. Yet despite all of this, to read McGahern as falling into some kind of anticlerical cliché does not do justice to a complex and finely wrought aesthetic sensibility. Ultimately McGahern is as religious a writer as Tolstoy and as religious a writer as modern Ireland has produced. Far from having "no religious feeling", as Seamus Deane writes of McGahern's first four novels, those books, as well as his later works, are drenched in religion.<sup>48</sup>

How can a writer so drawn to spirituality and religion, so preoccupied with the notion of art as sacred, be still thought of in some quarters as either hostile to, or disinterested in, Catholicism? To answer this question one ought to look first at a book which McGahern frequently cites and which influenced his worldview throughout his writing life: the 1951 study *The Greeks and the Irrational* by E. R. Dodds. Dodds argues

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<sup>47</sup> John McGahern, 'The Recruiting Officer', *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 72.

<sup>48</sup> Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), 221.

for a broadening out of what we understand as 'religion' – if we restrict the meaning of the word, he asks, "are we not in danger of undervaluing, or even of overlooking altogether, certain types of experience which we no longer interpret in a religious sense, but which may nevertheless in their time have been quite heavily charged with religious significance?"<sup>49</sup> For McGahern, two types of experience in particular – artistic and sexual – take on such religious significance, and a consideration of how these sides of human life impact on his characters makes it easier to see how he might, for instance, insist on *The Dark's* 'religious' character.

The priestly nature of the writer's art is best exemplified in perhaps the unlikeliest of places, McGahern's experimental 1979 novel *The Pornographer*. Though the narrator of the book makes ends meet by writing pornographic fiction, his attempts at writing are portrayed in sacramental fashion:

I washed and changed, combed my hair, and washed my hands again a last time before going over to the typewriter on the marble, and started to leaf through what I had written.

We used to robe in scarlet and white how many years before. Through the small window of the sacristy the sanded footpath lay empty and still between the laurels and back wall of the church... The wine and water and hand linen had been taken out onto the altar. The incessant coughing told the church was full. The robed priest stood still in front of the covered chalice on the table, and we formed into line at the door as the last bell began to ring... Among what rank weeds are ceremonies remembered, are continued. I read what I had written, to take it up.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 2.

<sup>50</sup> John McGahern, *The Pornographer* (1979; London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 20-21.

Although it is the McGahern novel containing least overt engagement with the Church, *The Pornographer* retains that insistence which is present throughout his work on the mysterious and magical nature of words placed in the right order, or what we might call literature.

One of McGahern's last published essays, 'God and Me', is the single clearest of his pronouncements on Catholicism. Again he remembers the immense power of the Church of his youth. "I grew up in a theocracy in all but name", he writes. "Churches in my part of Ireland were so crowded that children and old people who were fasting to receive Communion would regularly pass out in the bad air and have to be carried outside. Not to attend Sunday Mass was to court social ostracism, to be seen as mad or consorting with the devil". But this intense, unquestioning belief slipped away from him as an adolescent so that, as he memorably puts it, he awoke one day "like a character in a Gaelic poem" and realised he was no longer dreaming. "The way I view that whole world now", he writes, "is expressed in Freud's essay 'The Future of an Illusion'."<sup>51</sup>

Freud's essay seeks to explain humanity's continuing attachment to religion and to ideas of the divine – a quick examination of it makes for some revealing insights into McGahern's work. Freud argues that the origins of religious belief lie in man's craving for consolation in the face of a hostile, finite world: "life and the universe must

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<sup>51</sup> John McGahern, 'God and Me', *Love of the World*, 149.



be rid of their terrors". The invented God's central task is to "reconcile one to the cruelty of fate, particularly as shown in death".<sup>52</sup> Practically all of McGahern's fiction is clarified in the light of these insights. Everywhere his characters seek consolation, try to cheat time, escape their inevitable fates -- except very occasionally through sexual love they always fail. And the most common means of failure is a flight to the priesthood. The clearest example of this comes in 'The Wine Breath' which follows a day in the life of a country priest who recalls his reasons for entering the Church. Though prompted in large part by a sense of love and duty towards his devout mother, he cannot escape the realization that "it was out of fear of death he became a priest, which became in time the fear of life". The story ends with a familiar turn to the sexual, to life:

Somewhere, outside this room that was an end, he knew that a young man, not unlike he had once been, stood on a granite step and listened to the doorbell ring, smiled as he heard a woman's footsteps come down the hallway, ran his fingers through his hair, and turned the bottle of white wine he held in his hands completely around as he prepared to enter a pleasant and uncomplicated evening, feeling himself immersed in time without end.<sup>53</sup>

But it would be a mistake to read 'The Wine Breath' as an endorsement of the world of sensuous pleasure over that of religious contemplation. McGahern is reluctant to permit simple escape or consolation in the flesh, his fictions peopled by restless,

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<sup>52</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (London: Hogarth Press, 1928), 28, 30.

<sup>53</sup> John McGahern, 'The Wine Breath', *Creatures of the Earth*, 116, 120.

dissatisfied, lonesome lovers. Yes, the priest of this story has made an error, but in a mortal world there may be no way to be right.

Because there can be no final consolation, whether through prayer or art or human solidarity, McGahern never indulges in the knee-jerk hostility to Catholicism so evident in much contemporary thought. There is no sense in which we are invited to despise or dislike the doubting priest of 'The Wine Breath'. He faces the same dilemmas we all face and has gone about attempting a solution in his own ordered way. And while there are several brutish clergyman to be found in McGahern's pages, equally there are hateful lay people, from the wheedling politician of 'High Ground' to the calculating rapist John Quinn of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. In fact, for all the power wielded by the clergy of McGahern's youth, he frequently argues that the ordinary people of the Irish countryside paid them little heed, and "went about their sensible pagan lives as they had done for centuries".<sup>54</sup>

When trying to come to grips with an Ireland that was rushing to secularism, McGahern feared that the more worthwhile and beautiful aspects of Catholicism would be lost in the race to cosmopolitan modernity. He liked to quote Marcel Proust on this subject. Proust, a hundred years earlier, had witnessed and regretted similar trends towards disregarding the traditions and lifestyles that the French Church had created over centuries, and wrote of his worries in a letter quoted by McGahern:

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<sup>54</sup> John McGahern, 'The Solitary Reader', *Love of the World*, 87.

I can tell you at Illiers, the small community where two days ago my father presided at the awarding of the school prizes, the *curé* is no longer invited to the distribution of the prizes since the passage of the Ferry laws. The pupils are trained to consider the people who associate with him as socially undesirable... it doesn't seem to me right that the old *curé* should no longer be invited to the distribution of the prizes, as representative of something in the village more difficult to define than the social function symbolized by the pharmacist, the retired tobacco-inspector, and the optician, but something which is, nevertheless, not unworthy of respect, were it only for the perception of the meaning of the spiritualized beauty of the church spire.

If the Church is similarly cast aside in Ireland, what, wonders McGahern, is there to fill the spiritual void? McGahern, like Proust, though detached from any formal practice, was capable of seeing something worthwhile in the Church, something due respect. In that, he has a balance and a nuance absent in many contemporary Irish writers and commentators. "I never found the church ceremonies tedious", he writes. "They always gave me pleasure, and I miss them still. The movement of focus from the home and school to the church brought with it a certain lightness, a lifting of oppression, a going outwards, even a joy".<sup>55</sup> In all of these insights McGahern finds himself in consort with Tolstoy's assertion that 'the guidance given by religious perception' is central to all true art. The decision to place *Resurrection* in Fr Gerald's bookcase is an acknowledgement of the nearness of the literary to the religious sensibility.

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<sup>55</sup> McGahern, 'The Church and its Spire', *Love of the World*, 133-34, 137.

## IV

### **Magic: The Centrality of Yeats**

When staying with Hyde in Roscommon, I had driven over to Lough Kay, hoping to find some local memory of the old story of Tumaus Costello, which I was turning into a story now called 'Proud Costello, Macdermot's Daughter, and the Bitter Tongue'.

-- W. B. Yeats, 'Hodos Chameliontos'

Thinking of the censorious and anti-intellectual Ireland in which he grew up, McGahern recalls the very profound impression left on him by the realization that he had at least one Irish literary forebear who had risen above it all and reigned, however briefly, over the empire of the imagination:

The more we read of other literatures, and the more they were discussed, the more clearly it emerged that not only was Yeats a very great poet but that almost singlehandedly he had, amazingly, laid down a whole framework in which an indigenous literature could establish traditions and grow.<sup>56</sup>

"Yeats", he puts it more informally in some scribbled notes on his favourite of the Sligo writer's plays, *Purgatory*, "always instinctively knew what he was at".<sup>57</sup> This is classic McGahern locution: understated, admiring and accurate all at the same time, and it sums up his unmatched reverence for Ireland's greatest poet. McGahern read voraciously across all of Yeats's work. Unlike some critics, he took Yeats's plays seriously, and though *Purgatory* remained the one with most hold over him, he read them all and, I will argue in later chapters, used at least two lesser known dramatic works, *Where There is Nothing* and *The Land of Heart's Desire*, as inspiration for his fiction. Yeats's poetry is never far from McGahern's mind. Even Yeats's more obtuse, esoteric work plays its part in forming McGahern's aesthetic practice -- *A Vision*, McGahern writes, is a "rag bag but useful".<sup>58</sup> When trying to define what constitutes

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<sup>56</sup> John McGahern, 'The Solitary Reader', *Love of the World: Essays*, ed. Stanley van der Ziel, int. Declan Kiberd (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 92.

<sup>57</sup> McGahern papers, P71/1288. Handwritten notes for a piece on Yeats's *Purgatory*, 10 pp. n.d. [1].

<sup>58</sup> McGahern papers, P71/1288.

'great' writing McGahern allows himself to use a word that held no fear for Yeats but from which most writers, and nearly all critics, shy away: "all great writing has a spiritual quality that we can recognize but never quite define. [...] Call it moral fragrance or style or that older, healing word – magic".<sup>59</sup>

In July 1892, Yeats wrote an angry letter to his friend, the old Fenian John O'Leary, in which he expressed straightforwardly and unashamedly the significance of the supernatural to his work:

Now as to Magic. It is surely absurd to hold me 'weak' or otherwise because I chose to persist in a study which I decided deliberately four or five years ago to make, next to my poetry, the most important pursuit of my life. Whether it be, or be not, bad for my health can only be decided by one who knows what magic is and not at all by any amateur. [...] The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write.

For McGahern, mysticism of the type that fascinated Yeats -- that heady mix of rosicrucianism, the Kabbalah, fairy and folk tale -- was not appealing, and he never felt the need to attend séances or commune with the spirit world in that faddish late nineteenth-century way. And yet, if we read a few lines further in that letter to O'Leary, we find a more grounded definition of what can be meant by 'the mystical life' that is a closer match to McGahern's outlook on the imaginative and mysterious act of writing: "I have always considered myself a voice of what I believe to be a greater renaissance -- the revolt of the soul against the intellect -- now beginning in the

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<sup>59</sup> John McGahern, 'Playing with Words', *Love of the World*, 9-10.

world."<sup>60</sup> And, as for magic, Yeats, while believing in it as a supernatural force, could also be quite clear eyed in his description of it as being simply "the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed".<sup>61</sup> This quest for truth, a startling and accurate revelation of what it is to be alive, to be human, is what lies at the heart of all worthwhile literary endeavour, and, from McGahern's point of view, nobody succeeded in achieving it more fully than Yeats.

McGahern liked Yeats's famous dictum that "Art is art, because it is not nature!" After this slight misquotation from Goethe, Yeats expands on the essence of art a little further and puts us in mind immediately of McGahern: "It brings us near to the archetypal ideas themselves, and away from nature, which is but their looking-glass".<sup>62</sup> There is an irony that McGahern, so often admired for his naturalistic fidelity, and frequently placed alongside Patrick Kavanagh as a great Irish nature writer, should so determinedly see writing, like Yeats, as manufactured or 'unnatural'. So much did McGahern like this Yeatsian phrase that he quotes it almost directly in *The Pornographer*. Maloney, the editor of the journal to which Michael, the pornographer of the title, contributes, begins his professional life in a small Irish town working as a journalist on the local *Echo*. He has his heart broken by a local beauty and subsequently

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<sup>60</sup> W. B. Yeats to John O'Leary (July 1892), *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), 210-211.

<sup>61</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Magic', *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 28.

<sup>62</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'At Stratford-on-Avon', *Essays and Introductions*, 101-102.

gathers a group of people in the hotel where he stays to listen to his poetry and his thoughts on writing:

He warned against the confusion between art and life. Art was art because it was not nature. Life was a series of accidents. Art was a vision of the law. Rarely did the accident conform to the Idea or Vision, so it had to be invented or made anew so that it conformed to the Vision.<sup>63</sup>

Though Yeats is not credited, this speech is one of the few moments in the fiction in which McGahern comes close to straightforward Yeatsian quotation rather than allusion.

Before plunging further into Yeats and how his thoughts and words play out across McGahern in ever more complex and enriching ways, it is well to acknowledge perhaps the most important critical debt owed by him, and that is to the great literary scholar Donald Gordon alongside whom McGahern briefly worked while a visiting fellow at the University of Reading.<sup>64</sup> McGahern recalls Gordon affectionately in *Memoir*:

'What will I teach?' I asked deferentially after I'd been given the job. 'Teach them anything you like, my dear,' the brilliant Donald Gordon, the Professor of English, told me gaily as he poured us both another gin-and-tonic. 'I've been teaching them for the last twenty-eight years, and they have never understood one word *I* have taught them; and you can take my word, my dear, that they will

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<sup>63</sup> John McGahern, *The Pornographer* (1979; London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 27.

<sup>64</sup> One poignant document among McGahern's papers points to his lasting affection for Gordon. It is a single, handwritten sheet that reads: "In Memory of Donald Gordon. For Yeats, nature and experience were a book of images [and?] of a truth beyond the limits of the accident that is Ben Bulbin, Coole Park and Ballylea!". See McGahern papers, P71/1260.



not understand one word *you* say to them either; so teach them anything you like, my dear.'<sup>65</sup>

Gordon's most important contribution to Yeatsian scholarship was the book *W. B. Yeats: Images of a Poet* (1961), co-written with three other eminent scholars: Ian Fletcher, Frank Kermode and Robin Skelton. The book has a two-fold purpose, as Kermode writes in the preface: first as a simple recognition that many of the images used by Yeats in his poetry were "of visual origin", and second, to act as a catalogue for an exhibition of the same title shown in Manchester in May 1961 and in Dublin the following month.<sup>66</sup> It is from this book that McGahern takes one of his "favourite definitions of art", that it "abolishes time and establishes memory".<sup>67</sup>

The Goethe quote admired by Yeats and recycled by McGahern in *The Pornographer* is used as the epigraph to Gordon and Fletcher's chapter on 'Symbolic Art and Visionary Landscape' in which it is acknowledged that "under the combined influence of Blake and of other religious, literary and hermetic studies [...] Yeats began to enunciate a theory of the image as a vehicle and object of spiritual insight".<sup>68</sup> For McGahern too, a theory of the image became crucial to his work as a writer of fiction

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<sup>65</sup> John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 255.

<sup>66</sup> Frank Kermode, 'Preface', in D. J. Gordon et al, *W. B. Yeats: Images of a Poet -- My permanent or impermanent images* (Manchester: Manchester University Press; New York: Barnes and Noble, 1961), 3.

<sup>67</sup> McGahern talks about this in an interview with Eamon Maher. See Maher, *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2003), 146. For the quote itself, see D. J. Gordon and Ian Fletcher, 'Persons and Places', in Gordon et al., *W. B. Yeats: Images of a Poet*, 43.

<sup>68</sup> D. J. Gordon and Ian Fletcher, 'Symbolic Art and Visionary Landscape', *W. B. Yeats: Images of a Poet*, 94.

as is evident from his brief but revealing manifesto 'The Image' in which he declares that "Art is an attempt to create a world in which we can live". Poems like Yeats's 'Byzantium' and 'Ego Dominus Tuus' immediately spring to mind when we see McGahern declare the involuntary fashion in which images are summoned forth: "Image after image flows involuntarily now, yet we are not at peace -- rejecting, altering, shaping, straining towards the one image that will never come, the image on which our whole life too its most complete expression once".<sup>69</sup>

The Goethian art as 'not nature' is not the only instance in *The Pornographer* of McGahern associating Yeats with the rather puzzling character of Maloney. We are told that Maloney "had ambitions to be a poet once", and when we first meet him towards the start of the novel, he is described in strikingly Yeatsian terms:

He was in his all-tweed outfit, long overcoat and matching suit, gold watch-chain crossing the waistcoat which had wide lapels. The small hat was tweed as well, "English country", and much the same colour as the coat and suit, a dead briar brown. The bow-tie was discreetly florid and the highly polished oxblood boots positively shone.

Maloney is a complex character: failed poet, intellectual, pornographer, businessman, friend. McGahern uses him as something like a Greek chorus or a Shakespearean fool, constantly haranguing Michael over his shortcomings, and occasionally spilling a pearl of wisdom that pulls him back close to thoughts of Yeats. When, for instance, the narrator breaks the news of the unwanted pregnancy of his lover, Maloney

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<sup>69</sup> McGahern, 'The Image', *Love of the World*, 7.

roundly condemns him for his stupidity: “Most unprofessional, I am pained to have to say,” he spoke with exaggerated slowness. “Art is not life because it is not nature. If you spring a leak anywhere the whole boat may go down”. And four pages later, while advising on how good pornography ought to be written, he repeats the point: “Do you think my readers would want an account of two incompetent nincompoops like yourself and this fool of a woman? My readers want icing and sugar, not loaves of bread. And be careful not to let life in. Life for art is about as healthy as fresh air is for a deep-sea diver”. McGahern underlines this point about the need to keep art and life separate by having his narrator reconstitute, almost verbatim, aspects of a real trip he has taken on the Shannon as pornography. The result for McGahern is a risky nine pages of staid, dead prose in the middle of the novel – a risk that several contemporary critics were not willing to forgive.

The intriguing thing about all of this is that Maloney’s vision of art, despite some of his more distasteful characteristics as a man, matches that of Yeats and of McGahern. One of the very points of writing, argues Maloney, is that it permits the creation of another world, and that readers can escape into this world and thereby “get someone else to do their living and their dying for them”.<sup>70</sup> This comment is again borrowed from Yeats, via the French symbolist writer Villiers de l’Isle Adam, who, in his fin-de-siècle play *Axël* (1890), wrote: “As for living, our servants will do that for

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<sup>70</sup> McGahern, *The Pornographer*, 25, 125, 129, 163.

us."<sup>71</sup> The phrase was subsequently used by Yeats as an epigraph to his 1897 collection of stories *The Secret Rose*. And, again, towards the end of the novel Maloney puts us in mind of Yeats's 'Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea'. "I could not get girls when I needed girls", he tells the narrator, "Now I can get them when I'm no longer able for them. There must be a moral. You can't thrash the tide back with mere sticks, not even with the pure spirit". Whatever else we may say about Maloney's role in the novel, he is clearly meant to act as a prompt towards the writer he calls "our friend Yeats".<sup>72</sup>

*The Pornographer*, then, leaves us in no doubt that we are dealing with a writer for whom Yeats is an important presence and likely influence. Outside of his fiction, McGahern made no secret of his admiration for Yeats. An introduction he wrote for a 1999 selection of John Butler Yeats's letters comments on his particular admiration for W. B. Yeats's *Purgatory*, and he manages some comic speculation on W. B.'s visit to his father in New York: "Willie spent three evenings at the Petitpas restaurant, where some of the ladies tried to teach him to dance. The sight of the tall, aristocratic, tone-deaf poet attempting to dance must have been quite a spectacle."<sup>73</sup> The Yeatsian thread in McGahern has been commented on by all his major critics with varying degrees of success. Eamon Maher, when interviewing McGahern in 2002, began the discussion

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<sup>71</sup> Quoted by W. B. Yeats in *The Secret Rose, Stories: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Phillip L. Marcus, Warwick Gould and Michael J. Sidnell (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981), 5. The original French quote reads "Vivre? les serviteurs feront cela pour nous".

<sup>72</sup> McGahern, *The Pornographer*, 205, 165.

<sup>73</sup> John McGahern, 'Introduction', in John Butler Yeats, *Letters to his Son W. B. Yeats and Others 1869-1922*, ed. Joseph Hone, int. John McGahern (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 16.

with a question about McGahern's opinion of other Irish writers. "I admire many Irish writers", he responded, "Yeats particularly".<sup>74</sup> James Whyte's study of the same year sees an allusion in *Amongst Women* to 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'.<sup>75</sup> The passage from the novel reads: "When they moved away from the fire to the outer rooms the steady constant drip of rain from the eaves in the silence was like peace falling".<sup>76</sup> The relevant lines from Yeats are:

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping  
slow,  
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket  
sings<sup>77</sup>

Both Denis Sampson and Declan Kiberd find in that novel the presence of another Yeats classic, 'Easter 1916', in the line describing the young Moran sisters, Sheila and Mona: "so poised on the edge of their own lives that they listened as if hearing about the living stream they were about to enter".<sup>78</sup> James Whyte also draws a parallel between Yeats's idea of the storehouse of images, or *Spiritus Mundi* as he calls it in

<sup>74</sup> John McGahern in interview with Eamon Maher. See Maher, *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2003), 143.

<sup>75</sup> James Whyte, *History, Myth, and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 181.

<sup>76</sup> John McGahern, *Amongst Women* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 84.

<sup>77</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, 2001), 60.

<sup>78</sup> John McGahern, *Amongst Women* (1990; London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 80. 'Easter 1916' is again on McGahern's mind in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* when the excitement of London, its "parks, shops and galleries, the winding river and the endless living stream of its people" is recalled during a visit by Robert Booth. See John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002; London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 164.

'The Second Coming', and Carl Jung's 'collective unconscious'. McGahern, Whyte argues convincingly, was similarly inclined towards belief in an 'involuntary memory', a metaphysical process whereby images could be summoned up from somewhere outside the self.

Denis Sampson pays most attention to McGahern's allusive style as it applies not just to Yeats but to the wider canon. Whereas Whyte looks to Yeats as the source of involuntary memory, Sampson is more inclined to think of Proust and writes extensively of McGahern's reverence for the great French master. But Sampson also has much of interest to say of the Yeats connection, beginning with a 1979 interview in which McGahern gives one of the clearest pronouncements on his admiration for the poet. Here McGahern describes a youthful reading moment when he realized his forebear was somehow describing the life he now knew as a boy, a realization in part sparked by a coincidence of geographies: "I suppose if it did happen with anybody it was with Yeats, because we used to go to the sea in Sligo. I suppose Yeats gives me more pleasure than any other writer, and more constant pleasure."<sup>79</sup> Yeats's Knocknarea and Drumahair become McGahern's Boyle and Carrick-on-Shannon.

Early handwritten drafts of McGahern's most Sligo-centred story, 'Strandhill, the Sea' sees pleasure turn to homage, with him thinking deeply about places sacred to Yeats. At one point he refers to the Pollexfen mills at Ballisodare and later thinks

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<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Denis Sampson, 'A Conversation with John McGahern', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1 (July 1991), 13.

better of such an open prompt, changing Pollexfen (Yeats's mother's name) to another, less well known, name in the Yeats family tree, Middleton. Another change is made by McGahern when he originally allows himself to luxuriate in place names associated with Yeats, but excises them for the published story:

They'd seen the morning gradually darken, the sky falling into one black threat from the first small clouds of the morning by Lissadell and now it was full over Rosses and all Sligo Bay, and when it finally closed about Knocknarea it must rain, and then it'd be the whole long afternoon indoors listening to them drone.<sup>80</sup>

In another yet more telling passage not to make the final cut the boy narrator rails against his father's unceasing utilitarianism:

With his father everything had to be of use, there was no enjoyment [...] Even the year before he'd killed the beautiful river that ran through Sligo forever.

'What's the name of the river?' he asked.

He couldn't remember.

'Can you not remember out of the Geography.'

'No.'

'It shows the interest you have. The Garravogue, and the mountains,' he'd pointed from the parapet of the bridge, 'are the Ox Mountains, where it rises, and it flows through Lough Gill into Sligo bay. I did it with you last year and you've forgotten and it comes up every second year on the Scholarship paper.'

And it seemed that no one could look from the bridge and the foam of the falling water where the men were spinning for the trout and say the word Garravogue softly and simply enjoy it in this its day. No one could read Shakespeare either, anything that was useful must surely be a crushing bore.<sup>81</sup>

Another draft of this passage tells us that the boy's father, by failing to permit the imagination to run free, had "managed to ruin the magic of the town forever, on

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<sup>80</sup> McGahern papers, P71/300. Handwritten, pencil draft of 'Strandhill, the Sea', 8 pp, (n. d.), [2].

<sup>81</sup> McGahern papers, P71/299. Handwritten draft of 'Strandhill, the Sea' paginated 9-17 (n. d.), 13.

Markievicz Bridge, while they waited for the bus back to Strandhill".<sup>82</sup> The final published version of the story sees the boy steal some comics from a shop in order to break the dreariness of his family seaside holiday. It is only through them and the written word therein that the boy can restore the magic of imagination to which his father's life of toil persistently denies all access:

The turning of the pages without reading, pleasure of delaying pleasure to come. Heroes filled those pages week after week. Rockfist Rogan and Alf Tupper and Wilson the Iron Man. The room, the conversations, the cries of the seagulls, the sea faded: it was the world of imagination, among the performing gods, what I ashamedly desired to become.<sup>83</sup>

As so often in McGahern, it is inward one must turn in the quest for truth and clarity, and in the closing realization by the boy narrator there are hints of that epiphany that strikes Patrick Kavanagh at the conclusion to his great poem 'Kerr's Ass' in which he sees in his mind's eye "the God of imagination waking/In a Mucker fog".<sup>84</sup>

On the question of the coincidence of Yeats's and McGahern's geographies, one more point is worth making. While stories like 'Strandhill, the Sea', 'Doorways' and 'The Stoa' see McGahern's characters walk the holy ground of Sligo, there is one significant occasion when the roles are reversed and Yeats finds himself in McGahern's Roscommon and Leitrim. The passage in question opens Book III of *The*

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<sup>82</sup> McGahern papers, P71/298. Handwritten draft of 'Strandhill, the Sea' paginated 1-18 (n. d.), 14.

<sup>83</sup> John McGahern, 'Strandhill, the Sea', *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 44.

<sup>84</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Kerr's Ass', *Collected Poems*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 173.



*Trembling of the Veil*, Yeats's autobiographical account of his development as a writer and the friends who influenced him as the nineteenth century became the twentieth. The book is titled 'Hodos Chameliontos' (the way of the Chameleon), and focuses on Yeats's peripatetic and varied experiments in communing with the spirit world.

One of Yeats's stranger ideas to come from the 1890s and the beginning of his immersion in the rituals and beliefs of the Order of the Golden Dawn was his wish -- influenced again by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Axël* -- to establish a Castle of Heroes on a lake isle in Lough Key, County Roscommon, a lake that would, a half-century later become a very real part of John McGahern's world when he moved to live with his father in Cootehall, County Roscommon after the death of his mother. Yeats begins 'Hodos Chameliontos' with a remembrance of this time in his life:

When staying with Hyde in Roscommon, I had driven over to Lough Kay, hoping to find some local memory of the old story of Tumaus Costello, which I was turning into a story now called 'Proud Costello, Macdermot's Daughter, and the Bitter Tongue'. I was rowed up the lake that I might find the island where he died; I had to find it from Hyde's account in the Love Songs of Connacht [...] Presently we stopped to eat our sandwiches at the 'Castle Rock', an island all castle. It was not an old castle, being but the invention of some romantic man, seventy or eighty years ago. The last man who had lived there had been Dr. Hyde's father, and he had but stayed a fortnight. The Gaelic-speaking men in the district were accustomed, instead of calling some specially useless thing a 'white elephant', to call it 'The Castle on the Rock'. The roof was, however, still sound, and the windows unbroken. The situation in the centre of the lake, that has little wood-grown islands, and is surrounded by wood-grown hills, is romantic, and at one end, and perhaps at the other too, there is a stone platform where meditative persons might pace to and fro. I planned a mystical Order which should buy or hire the castle, and keep it as a place where its members could retire for a while for contemplation, and where we might establish mysteries like

those of Eleusis and Samothrace; and for ten years to come my impassioned thought was a vain attempt to find philosophy and to create ritual for the Order.

All of these ambitions, remembers Yeats, were driven by "an unshakeable conviction [...] that invisible gates would open as they opened for Blake, as they opened for Swedenborg, as they opened for Boehme, and that this philosophy would find its manuals of devotion in all imaginative literature".<sup>85</sup>

While John McGahern was no mystic, nor a believer in the sorts of esoteric spiritualist philosophies followed by Yeats, he did strongly believe, as we have seen from glancing at his short essay 'The Image', in "images that yet/Fresh images beget".<sup>86</sup> The notion of establishing a Castle of Heroes is doubtless something that McGahern would have found faintly amusing and redolent of that young Yeats he pokes fun at in the introduction to his father's letters, but for him, no less than for Yeats, the lakes and rivers of north Roscommon and south Leitrim became places of intense meditation where the imagination could be nurtured. It was while escaping into the still waters around Cootehall in the barracks boat that it first occurred to McGahern that he might become a writer, and thus live many imaginative lives rather than just one real, solid, limiting existence. But though McGahern did not share Yeats's ambitions to actually inhabit the castle in Lough Key, he shows himself conscious of

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<sup>85</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, ed. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald; asst. eds. J. Fraser Cocks III and Gretchen Schwenker (1955; New York: Scribner, 1999), 204.

<sup>86</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Byzantium', *The Poems*, 299.

'Hodos Chameliontos' in a romantic subplot that appears in 'The End or the Beginning of Love'. Here the hero of the book, Hugh, a young man typical of several of McGahern's later characters -- and particularly redolent of young Mahoney of *The Dark* -- is wooing his first love, a local Boyle schoolteacher, Kathleen Lynch:

The girl caught her breath as they came suddenly out of the wood in view of Lough Key. A long level field sloped down to the shore of the lake, shimmering and heaving in the light wind that blew across the crescent of mountain beyond, the blue Curlews and the darker Arignas. They went down the sloping field. The bright water was full of islands. A hundred yards off shore the old castle of the McDermott's rose out of the lake; roofless, lush weeds growing out of the leprous, crumbling walls and towers. [...]

"It is always beautiful," Kathleen sighed.

"The old castle and the new," Hugh showed her, pointing to the old feudal castle in the lake and the proud house of the King-Harmans on a mound to their left. It looked out over the islands and water.

"It is the castle of Una Bhan?" she asked.

"Yes. Do you know the song?"

"I taught it in school." [...] She began to sing, shyly and very low. The gaelic vowels fell with a heavy sadness from her lips, the weary plaintive lament of Costello who had waited three hours at the ford of Dunoige while his beloved was held in the bleak castle on the lake like a bird in a sally cradle. He had lived as the priest of his own love on the island where Una was buried, and was found dead on her grave.<sup>87</sup>

There were doubtless several reasons why McGahern decided against publishing 'The End or the Beginning of Love', and I have already suggested in my chapter on Joyce that one such was a dissatisfaction with the extent to which he had allowed the writers he most admired to live in the prose. The above quote is another example of this too open homage, and McGahern would find many ways in the years that followed to

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<sup>87</sup> McGahern papers, P71/8. Typescript draft of 'The End or The Beginning of Love' paginated pp 1-304 (n. d.), 238-39.

keep Yeats close without having him overpower his own work. The homage exists not only in the real parallels summoned up by contemplation of the castle in Lough Key, but in the romantic, frankly revivalist language used by Kathleen to describe it: 'heavy sadness', 'weary plaintive lament' and 'sally cradle' are too close to the fin-de-siècle reverie of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, and McGahern knew it. Future romances drawn in works like *The Leavetaking*, *The Pornographer* and *Amongst Women* would never again be so indulgent.

The great distance travelled by McGahern between the early abandoned efforts of 'The End or the Beginning of Love' and the later fiction are neatly on show in *The Leavetaking*. I mentioned in my introduction that this is McGahern's most writerly novel; in it he allows himself the luxury of a direct quote from Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach', and also, in the book's first half, a quote from Yeats's 'The Lover Pleads with his Friend for Old Friends'. "Though you are in your shining days" is the opening line of this 1897 poem, first collected in *The Wind among the Reeds*. It is a short poem, worth quoting in full in order to let us see why McGahern would want to use it:

Though you are in your shining days,  
Voices among the crowd  
And new friends busy with your praise,  
Be not unkind or proud,  
But think about old friends the most:  
Time's bitter flood will rise,  
Your beauty perish and be lost  
For all eyes but these eyes.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'The Lover Pleads with his Friend for Old Friends', *The Poems*, 88.

As with 'Dover Beach', the poem's theme ties in well with the action of the novel: old friendships and how they change, Kathleen McCarthy's bitterness towards the narrator's mother Kate McLaughlin, and Kate's sadness about decaying friendship.

The line comes at a crucial moment in the book when a series of writers are quoted, and in which McGahern seems to want to confess to his own classical temper. Kate McLaughlin is a schoolteacher with a deep love of literature and a gift for communicating that love to her students. The headmistress of her school, Mother Mary Martin, is curious about Kate's reasons for teaching poetry by heart to the children, and Kate's reply is telling: "What gives me most pleasure still from my own schooling are the poems I learned by heart then; constantly I find them passing through my mind, not unlike old friends or stray strands of music". When the nun further questions her, Kate reflects on the difficulty of taking literature seriously in an anti-intellectual, utilitarian world and winces at the memory of being mocked for her youthful love of poetry:

For years now she'd kept her love of poetry a secret, as defence against the laughter and ridicule it provoked; for years in this small town it had been a secret society of one. She flinched at the memory of Kathleen McCarthy; they'd been playing tennis for hours on the court at the back of the great house at Willowfield, and as they sat, the ball and rackets between them on the lawn, in the wonderful warm glow of the body after fierce exercise, she started quietly to recite *Though you are in your shining days*, and still shivered as she remembered the derision in Kathleen's laughter when she finished, the singsong that was a vicious mimicry of the poem, "Ah yes, Kate McLaughlin showing off again that she got the gold medal for English in the Carysfort Finals," and her shock into silence for years.

And then we get that difficult word 'magic' peeping through again: "She'd learned too that most teachers read little, had even an instinctive hatred of essential mystery and magic in all real poetry, reducing it to the factual or sentimental and preferably both, four ducks on a pond and a grassbank beyond".<sup>89</sup> All of this intellectualizing of the literary process is beyond the Reverend Mother, and the conversation is nudged on to a recruitment effort on behalf of the older woman to have Kate take up the veil.

What McGahern means in this example by 'magic' is a giving of oneself to the imagination with a concomitant rejection of the observed or much bruited 'real' world. Yeats, as ever, is brilliantly perceptive on this point in his essay on 'The Symbolism of Poetry' which McGahern had undoubtedly swallowed whole. Here he upbraids Tennyson for "brooding over scientific opinion", and calls for a "return to imagination":

we would cast out of serious poetry those energetic rhythms, as of a man running, which are the invention of the will with its eyes always on something to be done or undone; and we would seek out those wavering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination, that neither desires nor hates, because it has done with time, and only wishes to gaze upon some reality, some beauty.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> John McGahern, *The Leavetaking* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 37, 37-38, 38.

<sup>90</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'The Symbolism of Poetry', in *Essays and Introductions*, 163.

The image and the imagination are absolutely central, then, to both Yeats's and McGahern's artistic projects, and it is unsurprising that the critical work on Yeats most valued by McGahern should be subtitled 'My permanent or impermanent images'.

Over the less than two pages of text that the exchange between the narrator's mother and the Reverend Mother takes place, McGahern quotes from three different poets. Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'Heaven-Haven' has been transcribed onto the blackboard by Kate and it is clear what its purpose is beyond being a prop to inaugurate the conversation on poetry: it is subtitled 'A nun takes the veil' and so weaves itself nicely into the following discussion. The second quote, as we have seen, is from Yeats's 'The Lover Pleads with his Friend for Old Friends'. The third quote, "four ducks on a pond and a grassbank beyond" is from another Irish poet – a poet who, in turn, was an influence on Yeats – Ballyshannon's William Allingham:

Four ducks on a pond,  
A grass-bank beyond,  
A blue sky of spring,  
White clouds on the wing;  
What a little thing  
To remember for years-  
To remember with tears!<sup>91</sup>

Why is it here and how does it work within the broader context of the novel? Kate uses it as an instance of poetic banality: the factual, the sentimental, an invention, as Yeats would have it, not of the imagination, but of the will. If all that makes up poetry

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<sup>91</sup> William Allingham, 'Four ducks on a pond', *Flower Pieces and Other Poetry* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1893), 48.

is pretty description, then it is worthless. If all that forms McGahern's work is a series of autobiographical reflections and socio-historical observations, then that, too, is worthless. But, as with almost all of McGahern's allusions and quotations Allingham's poem works also in tandem with his plot. Kate still remembers with great pain the nasty admonition of Kathleen McCarthy: 'What a little thing/ To remember for years --/ To remember with tears!'

The chiming of the novel with these poems gives the text an echoing quality, McGahern using his predecessors to strengthen and validate his prose. Frequently McGahern has enough confidence in his own writing to return to individual images or motifs in later fictional efforts. *The Leavetaking*, for instance, tells the story of James Sharkey, his disastrous love for Kathleen McCarthy, his fear of death and related refusal to remove the hat from his balding head in Church. The story appears again in 'All Sorts of Impossible Things' when it is published the following year in *Encounter* and first collected four years later in *Getting Through*, with Kathleen McCarthy becoming Cathleen O'Neill. Similarly, the powerful description in *The Leavetaking* of the day of the narrator's mother's funeral is retold almost verbatim thirty years later in *Memoir*.

With the three poems already discussed McGahern is out in the open if one cares to do a little bit of extra reading. His hints and clues are not always so clear, though it is my sense that the more hidden the allusion, the more rewarding will be the prize when it is uncovered. A good example of this comes via one of the more



puzzling passages in *The Leavetaking*, a strange childhood memory of Kate's, already briefly discussed in my introduction but worth further attention:

She was home on holidays from the Marist convent where the King's Scholarship kept her a boarder. It had been hot all that summer in the mountains, shapes of hooves had set so rockhard that you stumbled if you tried to run in the fields, and the slabs of butter were wrapped in the big cabbage leaves. Haytime was almost over, her father scything the margins of the meadows, where scutch and briar so quickly blunted the edge that he tired of using the soft sandstone, sent her to the house for the new emery stone he'd put off using all summer, warning her to be careful bringing it back.

"Be careful with it or there'll be murder, after him hoarding it so long," her mother warned her again as she took the delicate black stone from its hidingplace.

The cool silk of aftergrass under her bare feet, the rustle of the poplar leaves, and beyond the blue reaches of the mountain, brought a wildness to her blood as she came back through the meadows, the black stone in her hand, thick and round at its centre, tapering to delicate points at both ends, the flowing rasp of it in his hand against blue steel. She passed a haycock in the old meadow and there the madness took shape. She started to roll the stone up its side, catching it as it fell. Up and down the slack rope she rolled it with excited hands, playing at the edges that turn a child's day to tragedy, until she rolled it quite over the cock. She might have still caught it coming down the other side if she'd rushed round but she stood frozen as it went out of sight.

The passage might be considered in a number of ways. First, it tempts the reader down the biographical path. We know that Susan McManus, McGahern's mother, won the King's Scholarship, was from *Sliabh an Iarainn*, and went on to be a primary school teacher. We might also be tempted to see here a fine example of realist verisimilitude: the cabbage leaves used for cooling, the hardened hooftracks, the great value put on

a sharpening stone on a small mountain farm. But McGahern, as he repeatedly stated, was no realist and thought the very term 'realism' suspect.

But, yet again, if we are to move beyond such surface reading, we will see that the passage is actually about sex and violence. The emery stone is notably phallic and brings 'a wildness to her blood'. It is not by accident that disaster falls as a result of the young girl's playing at a cock. This sort of reading may all be too Freudian for some readers' tastes, but especially in the case of *The Leavetaking* the pursuit of such an approach is merited. Psychoanalysis is discussed in the second half of the book when the protagonist's American lover enthusiastically describes her experience of it, concluding that without it she "would never have worked past those taboos". The sceptical narrator offers that he "would prefer to go to confession".<sup>92</sup> Sigmund Freud is directly mentioned in the original 1974 edition of the book but dropped in 1984 – McGahern perhaps wishing to achieve some distance from an overly determined critical Freudianism.<sup>93</sup> These overt considerations aside, what reassures the reader that he is not becoming altogether too Freudian is the allusion to Yeats's great meditation on ageing, 'Among School Children', that McGahern stitches into the story of the broken emery stone: 'up and down the slack rope she rolled it and with excited hands,

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<sup>92</sup> McGahern, *The Leavetaking*, 68-69, 117.

<sup>93</sup> For the reference to Freud, see John McGahern, *The Leavetaking* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 131.

playing at the edges that turn a child's day to tragedy'. The quote is from the fourth line of the second stanza:

I dream of a Ledaean body, bent  
That changed some childish day to tragedy –  
Told, and it seemed that our two natures blent  
Into a sphere from youthful sympathy,  
Or else, to altar Plato's parable,  
Into the yolk and white of the one shell.<sup>94</sup>

Leda, who Yeats first memorably introduced into his storehouse of images in 'Leda and the Swan' four years earlier, was a mortal woman raped by Zeus when he took the form of a swan. It is one of Yeats's most terrifying and disturbing poems. The product of this congress in Greek myth is three eggs: the first contains Castor and Clytaemnestra; the second Helen of Troy and Pollux; the third is yet to hatch. These unions within one egg are what lead to Yeats's imagery and ideas, via Plato, in the last four lines of the stanza; Plato influences McGahern's views on romantic or erotic love in the second half of *The Leavetaking* in which the protagonist seeks to somehow find a lover to fill the void left by the loss of his mother – this he almost literally manages in a brief love affair with a girl from his mother's mountain home.

More might be said of McGahern's Platonism, but for now all I would like to point out is the importance of seeing 'Among School Children' at work in *The Leavetaking*. Kate's death – the central fact of the novel – is caused by unwanted sexual intercourse with her husband, the narrator's father. She is warned, after treatment for

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<sup>94</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Among School Children', *The Poems*, 262.

breast cancer, that under no circumstances is she to become pregnant, yet her brutal husband insists, and we get sex at its very darkest in McGahern: "He meant to be careful, but moving in the warm dark flesh of the woman the male urge to inflict the seed deep within her grew and it was too late when he pulled free". The resultant infant is never named by the narrator, and is referred to only as "the cancer child".<sup>95</sup>

The troubling whorl of sexually violent images summoned by Yeats in his poetry is borrowed by McGahern to layer his fiction; 'Among School Children' becomes an artistic touchstone – a motif that McGahern is hinting at in his strange story of the emery stone and its near sacred power and value. If you pick the wrong exemplar—the 'sandstone' – you run the risk of blunting your own prose. Finally, on the subject of 'Among School Children', one might easily borrow that title for the whole first half of *The Leavetaking* as the narrator patrols his school one last time before being dismissed, and sees himself -- as does Yeats in the poem -- as though from above, a somewhat absurd 'smiling public man'. McGahern as a writer is like Kate McLaughlin of *The Leavetaking*. He allows long-ago learned poems to pass through his mind and through his pen, 'not unlike old friends or stray strands of music'. These shards, these strands, appear sometimes overtly, sometimes subtly. McGahern wants us to read carefully and read closely. He wants, as does Yeats, to "prolong the moment of contemplation" both for himself and for his readers.<sup>96</sup> If we fail to pay attention to

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<sup>95</sup> McGahern, *The Leavetaking*, 65, 72.

<sup>96</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'The Symbolism of Poetry', 159.

the ways in which McGahern is communing with the great artistic dead through those moments such as that which leads to the broken emery stone, we will miss the magic and instead be left with just 'energetic rhythms, as of a man running'.

For all of the importance of Yeats's beloved Sligo to his work and for all the impact that visiting places like Strandhill and Rosses Point had on McGahern as a child and young man, he urges us always to return to the page, to the imaginative world of words left to us by this greatest of poets. Addressing the W. B. Yeats summer school in 1995 McGahern warned against distraction from the words themselves:

Finally, in an age which has so many loud diversions away from the original printed word, may I say that the great heart of Yeats, the magical words, will not be found in these diversions or even in Dromahair or Drumcliffe Churchyard, but in *The Collected Poems* and *The Collected Plays* which stand on our shelves – or wait in Mr. Keohane's bookshop – and do not even ask to be opened.<sup>97</sup>

It is to these poems and plays that McGahern would return again and again over the course of his writing life and to which we, too, must turn if we are to engage fully with the world of McGahern's imagination.

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<sup>97</sup> McGahern papers, P71/1378. Typescript of a fragment of an address (n. d.).

## V

### **Instinct: Douglas Stewart and Sex**

Now is their hour, when they wake from that long swoon;  
Their pale curved wings are marked in a pattern of leaves,  
Shadowy for trees, white for the dance of the moon;  
And when on summer nights the buddleia gives  
Its nectar like lilac wine for insects mating  
They drink its fragrance and shiver, impatient with waiting.

They stir, they think they will go. Then they remember  
It was forbidden, forbidden, ever to go out;  
The Hands are on guard outside like claps of thunder,  
The ancestral voice says Don't, and they do not.  
Still the night calls them to unimaginable bliss  
But there is terror around them, the vast, the abyss.

And here is the tribe that they know, in their known place,  
They are gentle and kind together, they are safe for ever,  
And all shall be answered at last when they embrace.  
White moth moves closer to moth, lover to lover.  
There is that pang of joy on the edge of dying –  
Their soft wings whirr, they dream that they are flying.<sup>1</sup>

– Douglas Stewart, 'The Silkworms'

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Stewart, 'The Silkworms', *Collected Poems 1936-1967* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1967), 49-50.

"I write", explains McGahern, "because I need to write. I write to see".<sup>2</sup> Writing is not, then, about bringing pleasure either to himself or to others. It is an activity drawn from need, an instinctual act. Nor is writing something entirely rational. There comes a time in the composition of any of his works when McGahern has to "trust to instinct and strong feeling and imagination".<sup>3</sup> But what is instinct? It is one of those words we tend to use rather lazily to explain away the inexplicable. How do swallows know the way back from southern Africa to that one Irish byre or barn in which they were born? Instinct, we say. But what is that? As Peter White, the eponymous pornographer's doctor friend in McGahern's fourth published novel declares, "If you can tell where instinct ends and consciousness begins you'll make us all our fortunes".<sup>4</sup> The question of what instinct might be fascinated W. B. Yeats, and he examines its nature in a 1917 essay on what he called 'Anima Mundi', the storehouse of images which is "scarce separable from what we have begun to call 'the subconscious'".<sup>5</sup> He goes on in that essay to suggest that the source of all instinct is "the dead living in their memories", and uses the example of migratory birds to describe how this works: "it is the dream martens that, all unknowing, are master-masons to the living martens building about

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<sup>2</sup> John McGahern, 'Playing with Words', *Love of the World: Essays*, ed. Stanley van der Ziel, int. Declan Kiberd (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 9.

<sup>3</sup> John McGahern, 'Madness/Creativity', *Love of the World*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> John McGahern, *The Pornographer* (1979; London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 113.

<sup>5</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae', *Mythologies* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 343.

church windows their elaborate nests".<sup>6</sup> A better known iteration of that Yeatsian idea comes in 'Coole Park, 1929', his homage to Lady Gregory in which his great friend and patron is depicted as being possessed of a force that overrules even instinct:

They came like swallows and like swallows went,  
And yet a woman's powerful character  
Could keep a swallow to its first intent;  
And half a dozen in formation there,  
That seemed to swirl upon a compass point,  
Found certainty upon the dreaming air<sup>7</sup>

Thus Augusta Gregory presides over the talented generation of Synge, Hugh Lane, Shawe-Taylor and Yeats himself. As so often in Yeats there is a deal of mythmaking afoot here, but it remains one of his more memorable descriptions of the natural world, its rules and behaviour.

It should come as no surprise that 'Coole Park, 1929' was admired by McGahern and utilized in both the title and plot of his story 'Swallows', for, like Yeats, McGahern was troubled by instinct and its role in the human condition.<sup>8</sup> But it was not to Yeats but to a near contemporary that McGahern turned for a poem to act as his guide through the complex workings of instinct. While most of McGahern's touchstones are

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<sup>6</sup> Yeats, 'Per Amica', 359. In this thinking on migratory birds, Yeats is heavily influenced by Giraldus Cambrensis who tells us of 'Birds that do not appear in the winter-time' that outside of the spring and summer seasons they are "seized up into a long ecstasy and some middle state between life and death". See *The First Version of the Topography of Ireland*, trans. John J. O'Meara (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1951), 26-27.

<sup>7</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Coole Park, 1929', *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, 2001), 293.

<sup>8</sup> On 'Swallows' and possible allusions to Yeats, see Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern* (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press), 173-74.



heavyweight, canonical writers, there are a few exceptions, poems quoted from less well known figures, but used in the same way as he does with the greats. A leading example of such usage comes in *The Pornographer* with his quotation of, and meditation on, Douglas Stewart's marvellous poem 'The Silkworms', first collected in *Rutherford* in 1962 and since then probably Stewart's most anthologized poem.<sup>9</sup>

Douglas Stewart (1913-1985) was a New Zealander by birth, but is more frequently now thought of as an Australian, having moved there in 1938. It was while in Australia that he began to flourish as a poet and dramatist, and he is chiefly remembered for his nature poetry in collections like *The Birdsville Track* (1955) and *Sun Orchids* (1952). "I have always thought", said Stewart in a 1967 interview, "that one should keep in touch with the earth. You should not lose contact with nature, in case you become too much of a city-type".<sup>10</sup> As is clear from 'The Silkworms', however, these poems of the natural world are rarely straightforward celebrations, particularly as Stewart's career advances. *The Birdsville Track* is full of poems with titles such as 'White Cockatoo', 'The Brown Snake', 'Frogs', 'Finches' and 'The Night of the Moths'. This last poem bears strong similarities to 'The Silkworms' in juxtaposing wonder at the majesty of nature with a kind of melancholic despair at its brevity and cruelty:

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<sup>9</sup> For examples of the poem's enduring afterlife, see Judith Wright (sel. and int.), *A Book of Australian Verse* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1968), 161-2; James McAuley, *A Map of Australian Verse: The Twentieth Century* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1975), 234-5; and Vincent Buckley (ed.), *The Faber Book of Modern Australian Verse* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1991), 50-51.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Stewart in interview with John Thompson, 'Poetry in Australia: Douglas Stewart', *Southerly*, vol. 27, no. 3 (1967), 193.

The giant moths like sparrows! So many drowned  
On the stony mountain struggling out of the ground,  
So many battered from the air by the wind and the storm  
Where the black rain beats on Bindo; yet still they swarm  
From the tunnel in the clay, from the dark wet undergrowth,  
Through the night and the trees, great whirring moth by moth.<sup>11</sup>

Here, as in 'The Silkworms', you get again that opening surprised exclamation followed by the sense of futility coupled with instinct. Despite their inevitable doom, the moths, silkworms and other assorted insect life of Stewart's best poems keep going, keep reproducing, keep surviving. And, in all of this, there is a clear suggestion that the fate of these worms and moths is our fate too. As Stewart himself put it of these poems, "They're all a method of exploring the universe".<sup>12</sup>

It is easy to see how, when coming to write his most existentially inflected novel, *The Pornographer*, McGahern might be drawn to Stewart as an exemplar, though he drops only one small clue for the reader as Michael, the pornographer of the novel's title, surveys the dancefloor where he returns again and again in a vain quest to satisfy his sexual appetite and thereby salve the very pain of his existence:

All around us on the maple the old youngsters danced. The stained skin did not show in the blue light, but paunches did, bald heads, white hair, tiredness. People do not grow old. Age happens to us, like collisions, that is all. And usually we drive on. We do not feel old or ridiculous as we pursue what we have always pursued. Tonight, as any night, if we could anchor ourselves in the ideal greasy

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<sup>11</sup> Douglas Stewart, *Collected Poems*, 119.

<sup>12</sup> In interview with John Thompson, *Southerly* (1967), 193. Worth pondering perhaps, are the remarkable similarities between these poems and Derek Mahon's masterpiece 'A Disused Shed in County Wexford' (1975).

warm wetness of the human fork, we'd be more than happy. We'd dream that we were flying.<sup>13</sup>

This last sentence, drawn directly from 'The Silkworms', is another of those intriguing tears in the cloth of McGahern's prose that remains troubling for as long as the allusion remains hidden. It helps to know that it is to Stewart McGahern is turning, underlining as it does the central role that the sexual instinct plays throughout *The Pornographer*. It is this instinct that leads to the central dramatic core of the novel with the pornographer's impregnation of his lover, Josephine, who he has so casually conquered in the dance hall, and his subsequent desperation to escape what Patrick Kavanagh called, in another context, "the curse that domesticity brings".<sup>14</sup>

For the silkworms, instinct is personified in stanza five as 'the ancestral voice'. They know not why they spin, but feel compelled to do so. And so too with McGahern's pornographer as we reach the final page of the novel: "Not to have a reason still to follow the instinct for the true, to follow it with all the force we have, in all the seeing and the final blindness". The first time the two central characters of the book have sex is especially germane to this discussion as we see several of Stewart's images and ideas coalesce:

Within her there was this instant of rest, the glory and the awe, that one was as close as ever man could be to the presence of the mystery, and live, the caged

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<sup>13</sup> McGahern, *The Pornographer*, 33.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Untitled', *West47*, 4 (July 2001), 23. Michael's fear and loathing of settled domestication also owes much to Philip Larkin.

bird in its moment of pure rest before it was about to be loosed into blinding light; and then the body was clamouring in the rough health of the instinct.<sup>15</sup>

Entrapment, blindness, ecstasy, instinct: they are all here as McGahern tries to get to the root of what he believes about the sacred power of human sexuality, one of the great preoccupations over the entirety of his oeuvre, as exemplified by the posthumously published opening to his collected essays:

We are sexual from the moment we are born, it grows as the body grows and fails with the body until we die: by then it has become part of the mind, the will and the intelligence and heart, which grows in the human act of becoming as the body fails, and suffuses everything we hold precious or dear.<sup>16</sup>

In that fascination with the sexual, McGahern was again drawn to Yeats, who, in a mature letter to his first lover Olivia Shakespear, wrote that he was "still of opinion that only two topics can be of the least interest to a serious and studious mind -- sex and the dead".<sup>17</sup> This memorable, and typically Yeatsian, axiom was borrowed by McGahern for notes towards an unpublished lecture on *Purgatory*, that play in which unsanctioned sexual coupling plays such a grim and tragic role. And Yeats is again the obvious exemplar in the pornographer's gloomy meditations on the sad

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<sup>15</sup> McGahern, *The Pornographer*, 252, 39.

<sup>16</sup> John McGahern, 'Five Drafts', 3.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted by McGahern in notes towards a lecture on *Purgatory*. McGahern papers, P71/1288, 10 pp (n. d.), [2].

entrapment of the immortal soul in a body ever pushed and prompted by the demand for sex:

I am tired and flushed as I get up from the typewriter. Nothing ever holds together unless it is mixed with some of one's own blood. I am not able to read what I've written. [...] Is my flush the flesh of others, are my words to be their worlds? And what then of the soul set on its blind solitary course among the stars, the heart that leaps up to suffer, the mind that thinks itself free and knows that it is not — in this doomed marriage with the body whose one instinct is to survive and plunder and arrogantly reproduce itself along the way?<sup>18</sup>

By the time Yeats comes to recognize this problem fully, he is an old man, though none the less libidinal for it. And, like the pornographer, he seeks solace in artifice, in the act of writing itself, most memorably in 'Sailing to Byzantium' which sees the "Soul clap its hands and sing" as it escapes from the "tattered coat upon a stick" that is the ageing body.<sup>19</sup>

The view of sexual instinct as being a dominant and crucial force in all human lives is reiterated by Kate Ruttledge in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* as she, her husband Joe and their great friends Jamesie and Mary drive home from the sexually voracious John Quinn's ill-fated second wedding:

'I think people are sexual until they die,' said Kate, who was driving as she had hardly anything to drink.

'God, Kate, you're a caution,' Mary broke down in laughter.

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<sup>18</sup> McGahern, *The Pornographer*, 24.

<sup>19</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Sailing to Byzantium', *The Poems*, 239.

‘She’s right,’ Jamesie said. ‘You can see children jigging as soon as they can walk. The old crowd have it in their heads and if they have it anywhere else they are clever enough to keep it under cover.’<sup>20</sup>

For Douglas Stewart’s moths, too, the sexual is the one certainty, the one light towards which they move to experience ‘that pang of joy on the edge of dying’.

For the pornographer, as for Yeats, there is one other means of stopping time, of approaching something like happiness, beyond the sexual, and that is the act of writing itself. It is in this act that McGahern allows us the second and last direct hint at the presence of ‘The Silkworms’ in his imagination:

I sat and typed frivolously, like dabbing toes above steaming water: “There was a man and a woman. Their names were Mavis Carmichael and Colonel Grimshaw. They lived happily, if it could be said that they lived at all,” and I x-ed it out and put a fresh page in the typewriter, and then started to work, the worm at last spinning its silken tent.

Several hours and blackened pages later I got up from the typewriter for the day when the barely audible turning of a key sounded from one of the upstairs rooms after a loud banging of the front door. I thought it could be only two or three o’clock and yet it must have been close to six if one of the office girls had got home. It has just gone six. Seldom is it given, but when it is it is the greatest consolation of the spinning, time passing – sizeable portions of time – without being noticed.

But the welcome anaesthesia of writing comes infrequently and wears off quickly. The pornographer is almost always painfully conscious of his mortality, and this consciousness is heightened by the subplot of his dying aunt and his visits to her cancer ward that run parallel to the tale of his own entrapment via the uncontrollable

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<sup>20</sup> John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002; London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 179.

need to feed the sexual desire that brings him ever closer to the brink of ruination. Perhaps inevitably, the visits to his dying aunt heighten both his awareness of death and his desire to live, to escape to the ecstasy of carnal fulfilment. One of the finest paragraphs in the novel sees these two powerful forces briefly intersect as he goes on a date with one of those charged with easing his aunt's journey to death, Nurse Brady:

The taxi turned in the hospital gates, went past her window, the moonlight pale on the concrete framing the dark squares of glass. The wheel had many sections. She had reached that turn where she'd to lie beneath the window, stupefied by brandy and pain, dulling the sounds of the whole wheel of her life staggering to a stop. I was going past that same window in a taxi, a young woman by my side, my hand on her warm breast. I shivered as I thought how one day my wheel would turn into her section, and I would lie beneath that window while a man and woman as we were now went past into the young excitement of a life that might seem without end in this light of the moon.<sup>21</sup>

And here too, in this account of young lovers and their efforts to negotiate a path through the complications of their individual yet intertwined lives, McGahern was thinking of 'The Silkworms', as is evident from a discarded passage in the archive:

If she went out with me, and the evening did not work out like the dream, and I was old enough to know that it never did, how was I to be rid of her. Each time I'd to take the brandy, and there was no knowing how long my aunt might be still in hospital, I'd risk having to face her. It was this same caution or cowardice that did not allow me to get to know the people living in this same house as me. I was comfortable here. If I got too involved with them I was afraid I might have to leave. In what must be a galvanic sense of singleness it hardly ever occurred to me that it was *them* who might have to leave.

And so having thought myself out of this dream of action, the ugly slug makes its painful crawl from where it has stuffed and feasted itself on the

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<sup>21</sup> McGahern, *The Pornographer*, 49-50, 172.

mulberry leaves to where it starts spinning its silken tent, and is soon lost in the spinning.<sup>22</sup>

The spinning here is the pornographer's writing, the only place he seems capable of sustained happiness, or, if not happiness, solace. But the suggestion is that the retreat to etching words on the page is also little more than a delusion, that, like Stewart's silkworms, the pornographer is trapped, self-incarcerating in the little familiar box that is his world and that is the human condition. Compare that passage where he is 'soon lost' in his writing with the third stanza of 'The Silkworms':

Even in the young, each like a little dragon  
Ramping and green upon his mulberry leaf,  
So full of life, it seems, the voice has spoken:  
They hide where there is food, where they are safe,  
And the voice whispers, 'Spin the cocoon,  
Sleep, sleep, you shall be wrapped in me soon.'

For McGahern and his generation in mid-twentieth-century Ireland, there is another very real and powerful voice coming from outside the box -- that of the Catholic church -- and while he can be very generous in his praise for the grace bestowed on him by that institution, McGahern is also at times acerbic and unblinking in his criticism. "Authority's writ", he recalls of his youth, "ran from God the Father down and could not be questioned. Violence reigned as often as not in the homes as well". Behind this perversion lay a denial of the sexual instinct: "One of the compounds at

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<sup>22</sup> McGahern papers, P71/149. Four handwritten pages from drafts of *The Pornographer*, 65-66.



its base was sexual sickness and frustration, as sex was seen, officially, as unclean and sinful, allowable only when it too was licensed. Doctrine separated body and soul".<sup>23</sup>

While poetry or great literature can be seen as one form of religious expression, the other most common forum for such expression lies in the sexual life – and this is where we must think of McGahern's insistence that *The Dark*, with all its explicit and painful exploration of a teenage boy's sexual awakening, ought to be read as a "religious" novel.<sup>24</sup> The narrator's mother in *The Leavetaking* provides a clear example of this merging of the sexual with the religious instinct when she ruminates on her lost virginity the morning after her marriage's consummation:

"Has it happened to me?" was all her mind could frame over the tea and toast and brown bread of the North Star Hotel breakfast the next morning, the mind already trying to change the sheets and blood and sexual suck of the night into a sacrificial marble on which a cross stood in the centre of tulips and white candles.

While still a young boy, the narrator promises his devout mother that he will one day become a priest and say masses for her. Much of *The Leavetaking* is about how he copes with the guilt of not keeping that promise after his mother's early death. In a key passage he reflects on the choice and on the possibly sacramental nature of sexual instinct:

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<sup>23</sup> John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 18.

<sup>24</sup> John McGahern to Michael McLaverty (8 August 1965), in *Dear Mr McLaverty: The Literary Correspondence of John McGahern and Michael McLaverty 1959-1980*, ed. John Killen (Belfast: Linen Hall Library, 2006), 42.

The true life was death in life. The sexual life was destruction; the sweet mouth, ruin. In my end was my beginning. One day I would say Mass for her.

Could not the small acts of love performed with care, each normal, mysterious day, be a continual celebration, as much as the surrender of the dream of woman would allow the dubious power of the laying on of anointed hands?

Though framing the statement as a question leaves us in doubt as to the narrator's commitment to the idea, his decision to marry and stay with his lover and thus to lose his teaching post is the best example in all of McGahern of the religious, even priestly, nature of sex:

My love waits for me in a room at Howth. The table will have bread and meat and cheap wine and flowers. Tomorrow we will go on the boat to London. It will be neither a return nor a departure but a continuing. We will be true to another and to our separate selves, and each day we will renew it again. It is the only communion left to us now. Oh soul full of grace, pray for me, now and at the hour, Oh pray for us both; even now I feel the desperate need of prayer.<sup>25</sup>

For McGahern, that stark religious need is sated again and again by the transcendent power of writing.

The ancient Greeks, argues E. R. Dodds in *The Greeks and the Irrational*, a favourite book of McGahern's, thought that sexual passion could fall into the category of religious experience.<sup>26</sup> For the most dominant theology in the Irish Catholic Church, on the other hand, sex is degraded, shameful and to be avoided except for procreation. This, argues McGahern, is the Church's great error, pulling it down into an anti-life

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<sup>25</sup> John McGahern, *The Leavetaking* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 42, 156, 168-69.

<sup>26</sup> See E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951).

whorl. Sexual desire, the sexual self, is at the very heart of what it is to be human; to deny it is fatal. Yet it is also more than that – it is exalted. "I see sexuality as just part of life", said McGahern in interview towards the end of his life. "Either all of life is sacred or none of it is sacred. I'm inclined to think that all of life is sacred and that sexuality is a very important part of that sacredness."<sup>27</sup>

The sexual, then, when distanced from the purely instinctual, can become sacred and transcendent. But if left at the level of titillation, of pornographic bodily function, it dies on the page, enslaving the body and killing off the soul. Pornographic writing is by its nature, as McGahern makes clear in the pornographer's absurd and tedious recreation of his Shannon holiday with Josephine as a lust-fuelled frolic for his fictional characters, the Colonel and Mavis, bad writing. In his outlook on this McGahern is influenced by W. H. Auden whose essay on 'Reading' memorably comes to the same conclusion about the pornographer's trade:

One sign that a book has literary value is that it can be read in a number of different ways. Vice versa, the proof that pornography has no literary value is that, if one attempts to read it in any other way than as a sexual stimulus, to read it, say, as a psychological case-history of the author's sexual fantasies, one is bored to tears.<sup>28</sup>

If sex remains at the level solely of instinct then we remain as Stewart's silkworms, gorging ourselves on mulberry leaves and spinning our silken tents, lulled into the

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Eamon Maher, 'Religion and art', *The John McGahern Yearbook*, 1 (2008), 117.

<sup>28</sup> W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and other essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 4.

false promise that our world, our box, is the only world, and all that will be left to us after the sating of our bodily needs is the dream of flight.

## VI

### The fume of muscatel: Yeats's Ghosts

Midnight has come and the great Christ Church bell  
And many a lesser bell sound through the room;  
And it is All Souls' Night.  
And two long glasses brimmed with muscatel  
Bubble upon the table. A ghost may come;  
For it is a ghost's right,  
His element is so fine  
Being sharpened by his death,  
To drink from the wine-breath  
While our gross palates drink from the whole wine.<sup>1</sup>

– W. B. Yeats, 'All Souls' Night'

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<sup>1</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, 2000), 279-280.

Denis Donoghue gets John McGahern surprisingly wrong in a 2006 review of *Memoir*. Donoghue argues that McGahern had a "strange sense of his major precursors in Irish literature". This 'strange sense', continues Donoghue exhibits itself in the ways in which McGahern has freed himself of the anxiety of influence: "He does not claim any strong relation to Swift, Yeats, Joyce, or Beckett. Some readers think of him in some relation to Beckett, but that seems extreme. Not being a poet, he is free of Yeats. He can circumvent Joyce by staying out of Dublin." These claims seem all the more odd as they follow an admiring paragraph about 'The Wine Breath', described, quite rightly, as "one of his best stories".<sup>2</sup> And yet, as I will seek to demonstrate in this chapter, 'The Wine Breath' is the McGahern story that owes most to Yeats, and McGahern would have thought it absurd and unfortunate to read his work as 'free of Yeats'. It is a perplexing misreading by Donoghue, himself one of the better Yeats scholars of his age, and might perhaps be read as a compliment to the success of McGahern in keeping the author-god smiling wryly offstage, paring his fingernails. And yet that explanation hardly seems sufficient given the clue sewn into the title of the story, borrowed as it is from one of Yeats's greatest poems, 'All Souls' Night'.

Ernie O'Malley, the IRA guerilla fighter, in his memoir of Ireland's troubled times and struggle for independence, *On Another Man's Wound*, described his time spent among the mountain people of Donegal in memorable terms: "The dead walked

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<sup>2</sup> Denis Donoghue, *Irish Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 234, 233. Originally a review of *Memoir* in the *New York Times* (March 2006).

around, there was an acceptance of their presence, no horror and little dread, the wall was thin between their living and their dead".<sup>3</sup> This book was unreservedly admired by John McGahern, and in its account of the relationship of the dead to the living it is drawing from long established Irish custom to which McGahern returns in 'The Wine Breath', the closest he comes to writing a ghost story. One note among McGahern's papers sees him transcribing on this very subject from Yeats's 'If I were four-and-twenty':

Then too I would associate that doctrine of purgatory which Christianity has shared with Neo Platonism, with the countryman's belief in the nearness of his dead: working out their penance in rath or at garden end; and I would find in the psychical research of our day detail to make the association convincing to intellect and emotion.<sup>4</sup>

The title 'The Wine Breath' stumped the critics for some time, and Denis Donoghue was not the only reader to miss the Yeatsian allusion. McGahern's titles in general interest David Malcolm; he points to a recurring ambiguity in the names chosen for many of the stories – most notably 'The Beginning of an Idea' and 'Swallows' – that make up the 1978 collection *Getting Through*. In particular he wonders about the reasoning behind 'The Wine Breath':

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<sup>3</sup> Ernie O'Malley, *On Another Man's Wound: A Personal History of Ireland's War of Independence* (1936; Boulder: Roberts Rinehart, 1999), 103.

<sup>4</sup> P71/1287. Handwritten draft of a piece on Yeats (n. d.), 1 page on Colgate University notepaper. This is a quote from W. B. Yeats, 'If I were Four-and-Twenty' (1919), *Explorations*, selected by Mrs. W. B. Yeats (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), 267.

The only reference to wine in the story comes at its end, as the priest remembers or imagines a young man, “not unlike he had been once”, waiting outside a girl’s door with a bottle of wine. In the story the wine is never drunk; therefore how can it be on anyone’s breath?<sup>5</sup>

Had Malcolm been more attentive to Denis Sampson’s reading of ‘Swallows’, in which he convincingly argues that Yeats’s ‘Coole Park, 1929’ is a ghostly presence, he might have seen what lay behind the naming of ‘The Wine Breath’.

McGahern’s source for the title is Yeats’s haunting 1920 meditation on death and the otherworld, ‘All Souls’ Night’, the opening stanza of which I have used as my epigraph. Written in Oxford during one of his “moments of exaltation”, Yeats used this poem as the epilogue to his difficult study of cyclical time and the categorization of human personality, *A Vision* (1925), and it was subsequently collected in *The Tower* (1928).<sup>6</sup> Over the course of the poem he summons up three ghosts, all of whom had been close friends who had died in the previous three years and who had devoted much of their lives to study of the metaphysical, especially the source and destination of the soul: William Horton (1864-1919), an occult painter; Florence Emery (1869-1917), better known as Florence Farr, an actress and mystic; and MacGregor Mathers (1854-1918), author of *The Kabbala Unveiled*, and a key figure behind Yeats’s beloved occult society, the Order of the Golden Dawn.

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<sup>5</sup> David Malcolm, *Understanding John McGahern* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 74.

<sup>6</sup> William Butler Yeats, *A Vision: An Explanation of Life Founded Upon the Writings of Giralduus and Upon Certain Doctrines Attributed to Kusta Ben Luka* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1925), xii.



Though none of these three figures are mentioned by McGahern in 'The Wine Breath', Florence Farr finds her way into *The Pornographer* when Maloney, the distinctly Yeatsian editor, reminds the eponymous pornographer of Farr's insistent credo: "We are nothing if not advanced".<sup>7</sup> McGahern borrows this quote from Donald Gordon's study *W. B. Yeats: Images of a Poet*, a book I have already suggested is an important influence on McGahern's thinking about Yeats, and in particular on his meditations on 'the image'. Gordon explains the provenance of the quote by relating a brief history of the friendship between Farr and Yeats in Bedford Park of the 1890s. Farr arranged a season of plays to which Yeats's one-act *The Land of Heart's Desire* would be a curtain raiser:

The programme cover and a poster were designed by Aubrey Beardsley while Miss Farr herself tried to startle journalists by declaring that her season represented a new movement in the English theatre. In *The Sketch* of 28th March 1894, there is a not unamusing account of Miss Farr's conception of the Avenue season. "'You see we are nothing if not advanced", began the future Lady Brandon, merrily... "And in what sense, Miss Farr, do you understand the word 'advanced'?" "It is by no means easy to answer that question, but perhaps I can best express what I think if I say that we consider absolute realism only a phase of dramatic art."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John McGahern, *The Pornographer* (1979; London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 204.

<sup>8</sup> D. J. Gordon and Ian Fletcher, 'The Poet and the Theatre', in Gordon *et al*, *W. B. Yeats: Images of a Poet -- My permanent or impermanent Images* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961), 58.

Yeats recalls this period of his life in 'The Tragic Generation' section of his *Autobiographies*, remarking that Farr had "but one great gift, the most perfect poetical elocution".<sup>9</sup> Working alongside Farr, he wrote *The Land of Heart's Desire* as a means to counteract the then fashionable realism of Ibsen which he so despised, and dedicated the play to her.<sup>10</sup>

McGahern shows himself conscious of the play by using the name Michael Bruen in 'The Wine Breath' as the man whose funeral is recalled by the priest at the story's centre.<sup>11</sup> The name 'Bruin' occurs in *The Land of Heart's Desire* which is about the contest between a fairy child, the Bruin family and Father Hart for the allegiance and affection of Mary Bruin, newly married bride of Shawn Bruin. The fairy child wins out and the play ends with Mary's death. With its supernatural contest and struggle between the spirit world and the pull of human love through marriage, it is acutely reminiscent of the much better known Yeats and Lady Gregory play, *Cathleen Ni*

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<sup>9</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, ed. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald; asst. eds. J. Fraser Cocks III and Gretchen Schwenker (1955; New York: Scribner, 1999), 219.

<sup>10</sup> Seamus Heaney may also be thinking of this early Yeats play in a short piece commemorating McGahern and his Leitrim home: "Gunfire, however, is the last thing I associate with Foxfield. Always it appears to me in a kind of Elysian light, a summer dusk, because it was so obviously the McGahern land of heart's desire". See Seamus Heaney, 'Quitting Time', *The John McGahern Yearbook*, vol. one (2008), 15.

<sup>11</sup> The chief authority on Irish surnames associates 'Bruen' with County Roscommon, where the story is set. See Edward MacLysaght, *A Guide to Irish Surnames*, second ed., revised and enlarged (Dublin: Helicon Books, 1965), 34. I am grateful to Roy Foster for pointing out to me the Yeatsian associations behind the name 'Bruen'.

*Houlihan*.<sup>12</sup> It is also certain that McGahern was familiar with Yeats's story 'The Old Men of the Twilight', first published in *The Weekly Sun Literary Supplement* in December 1895 and subsequently part of *The Secret Rose* collection. In the story Michael Bruen is an old Sligo man who shoots a heron – the heron is then transformed into an ancient who tells Bruen that he and his fellow druids were changed into herons by St Patrick as punishment for not renouncing their ways. This is how the story begins:

At the place, close to the Dead Man's Point, at the Rosses, where the disused pilot-house looks out to sea through two round windows like eyes, a mud cottage stood in the last century. It also was a watchhouse, for a certain old Michael Bruen, who had been a smuggler, and was still the father and grandfather of smugglers, lived there.

It is tempting to see the imagery of the herons as germane to McGahern's work, especially in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. Because the druids do not lay down their knives with which they delight in carving their thoughts in Ogham, they are punished by Patrick who says:

I shall make you an example for ever and ever; you shall become grey herons and stand pondering in grey pools and flit over the world in that hour when it is most full of sighs; and your deaths shall come by chance and unforeseen, for you shall not be certain about anything for ever and ever.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See W. B. Yeats, *The Land of Heart's Desire*, in *The Variorum Edition of the Plays*, ed. Russell K. Alspach, assisted by Catharine C. Alspach (London: Macmillan, 1966), 180-213.

<sup>13</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'The Old Men of the Twilight', in *The Secret Rose, Stories: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Phillip L. Marcus, Warwick Gould and Michael J. Sidnell (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981), 54, 59.

Hérons and their flight are an insistent motif throughout *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, so insistent in fact that they seem to pass from realism into something more symbolical: "A pair of herons moved sluggishly through the air between the trees of the island and Gloria Bog"; "They stood on the high hill over the inner lake and watched a heron cross from the wooded island to Gloria Bog"; "The occasional lone heron flew between the island and the bog. Nothing was sharp".<sup>14</sup> Whatever these birds' function in the novel, it is clear that McGahern liked Yeats's story well enough to summon up "the lost day of Michael Bruen's funeral nearly thirty years before" for 'The Wine Breath', just as Yeats summons his three dead friends in 'All Souls' Night'.<sup>15</sup>

Like 'All Souls' Night', 'The Wine Breath' concerns itself with the near contact between the living and the dead. For this reason critics have in the past unsurprisingly seen parallels between it and James Joyce's 'The Dead'. There are several broad hints: an Ireland covered with snow; the central ghosts of the stories sharing the same first name (*Michael* Bruen in McGahern and *Michael* Furey in Joyce); the name of the bishop and old friend of the story's unnamed priest narrator being Joyce. Both 'The Dead' and 'All Souls' Night' reflect on the proximity of the living to the dead. Gabriel Conroy, the central character of Joyce's story, feels in the closing moments after his

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<sup>14</sup> John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002; London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 44, 125, 158.

<sup>15</sup> John McGahern, 'The Wine Breath', *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 110.

wife's tale of young Michael Furey and his death for love of her, that his soul "had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead".<sup>16</sup> Yeats, as has been expansively documented by his critics and biographers, was fascinated by possible communication between the two worlds, and he published a short essay on the subject in his early and influential volume of observations on folklife *The Celtic Twilight* (1893). "In Ireland", he writes, "this world and the world we go to after death are not far apart. [...] Indeed there are times when the worlds are so near together that it seems as if our earthly chattels were no more than the shadows of things beyond".<sup>17</sup> More than twenty years later he returned to the subject, now becoming envious of the liberty granted in being dead: "The dead, as the passionate necessity wears out, come into a measure of freedom and may turn the impulse of events, started while living, in some new direction". These souls, not knowing they are dead, return to us as ghosts: "Awhile they live again those passionate moments, not knowing they are dead, and then they know and may awake or half awake to be our visitors".<sup>18</sup>

The unnamed priest at the centre of 'The Wine Breath' has a brush with a ghostly past similar to that experienced by Gabriel Conroy or by Yeats in 'All Souls' Night'. Since his mother's death, the priest has increasingly experienced

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<sup>16</sup> James Joyce, 'The Dead', *Dubliners* (int. and notes Terence Brown (1914; rpb. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 224.

<sup>17</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Concerning the Nearness Together of Heaven, Earth, and Purgatory', *Mythologies* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), 98.

<sup>18</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae', *Mythologies*, 355, 360.

transportations to the other side: "it was as if the world of the dead was as available to him as the world of the living." But where the story is more in debt to Yeats than to Joyce is in the nature of the priest's feelings about his haunted sensibility. For Gabriel Conroy the intrusion of Michael Furey's shade into his night is a largely unwelcome one. For McGahern's priest, his memory of the day of Michael Bruen's snow-covered funeral is vivid but not unhappy. And, crucially, it causes him not to run away from the other world but, like Yeats, to summon it up. When he retires to his house after his day of reflection on the Bruen burial he is lonesome and longs for company, even the friendship of a spirit: "He would be glad of a ghost tonight, be glad of any visitation from beyond the walls of sense."

Once the connection between the story's title and Yeats's poem is made, several other allusions to 'All Souls' Night' become apparent. One such connection is the presence of tolling bells, a commonplace literary device to signal death. The great bell – 'the old Tom' – of Christ Church College Oxford begins Yeats's meditation on lost friends and the fate of the soul. In 'The Wine Breath', at Michael Bruen's burial, "They hadn't finished digging when the first funeral bell came clearly over the snow"; and we are told that the priest of the story is so dissatisfied with his day that he does not, as he normally would, "call to the sexton locking up under the bellrope". Why does McGahern include this detail? Ordinarily we would read it as a nice bit of realism, but, armed with Yeats, we can see its significance reverberates. Through the allusion,

these small moments take on added significance and begin to toll and echo from text to text.

But there are stronger reasons still to see the Yeats poem as a phantom presence in 'The Wine Breath'. All Souls' Day, an important feast in the Catholic calendar, takes place each year on 2<sup>nd</sup> November and begins a month of prayer and fasting for the intentions of the holy souls in Purgatory. In Ireland this tradition has been particularly strong, with sacrifices such as the giving up of alcohol a common token of reverence. It is not without significance, then, that the bulk of the action in McGahern's story takes place on a day in 'late October'. In addition to this important overlap, one key passage of the story, where the priest remembers his mother's fears, is devoted to a consideration of the soul and its destination:

She had been afraid of ghosts: old priests who had lived in this house, who through whiskey or some other ill had neglected to say some Mass for the dead and because of the neglect the soul for whom the Mass should have been offered was forced to linger beyond its time in Purgatory, and the priest guilty of the omission could himself not be released until the living priest had said the Mass and was forced to come at midnight to the house in all his bondage until the Mass was said.<sup>19</sup>

And it is not just in fiction that the Catholic treatment of the soul interested McGahern. His late essay, 'God and Me', remembers the superstitions surrounding the feast-day in his Irish childhood:

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<sup>19</sup> McGahern, 'The Wine Breath', 112, 118, 113, 118.

The story of Christ and how He redeemed us ran through our year as a parallel world to the solid world of our daily lives: the feasts of saints, Lent and Advent, the great festivals of Christmas and Easter, all the week of Whit, when it was dangerous to go out on water; on All Souls' Night, the dead rose and walked as shadows among the living.<sup>20</sup>

This was an Irish superstition available not just to McGahern, but to Yeats too.

Other than as a link between the living and the dead, what other significance does McGahern's priest have? There are certainly no priests in 'All Souls' Night', despite the poem's religious title. Here it will be useful to look closely at the first of the ghosts summoned up by Yeats, William Horton:

Horton's the first I call. He loved strange thought  
And knew that sweet extremity of pride  
That's called platonic love,  
And that to such a pitch of passion wrought  
Nothing could bring him, when his lady died,  
Anodyne for his love.  
Words were but wasted breath;  
One dear hope had he:  
The inclemency  
Of that or the next winter would be death.<sup>21</sup>

There are several images and ideas in these lines that intersect with McGahern's story. 'The Wine Breath' is perhaps the single clearest artistic expression of one of its author's central preoccupations: the choice between a life of the spirit or soul as represented by

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<sup>20</sup> John McGahern, 'God and Me', *Love of the World: Essays*, ed. Stanley van der Ziel, int. Declan Kiberd (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 149.

<sup>21</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'All Souls' Night', *The Poems*, 280.



the priest, and the life of the body, of carnal joy, so wonderfully suggested in the story's closing paragraph:

Somewhere, outside this room that was an end, he knew that a young man, not unlike he had once been, stood on a granite step and listened to the doorbell ring, smiled as he heard a woman's footsteps come down the hallway, ran his fingers through his hair, and turned the bottle of white wine he held in his hands completely around as he prepared to enter a pleasant and uncomplicated evening, feeling himself immersed in time without end.<sup>22</sup>

It is a safe bet that the wine that this imagined young man, this ghost of a possible past, will share with the woman behind the door, is Muscatel.

Less certain, but tempting nonetheless, is the line one might draw between the choices made by the troubled priest and by William Horton. In his dedication to *A Vision*, Yeats alludes to Horton as a ladies' man up until the age of fifty, at which point he thought, "I do not need women but God".<sup>23</sup> The reverse decision is made by the priest of 'The Wine Breath'. As a younger man, at the behest of a woman, his mother, he has devoted his life to the spirit and to God. Now, as he grows older and begins to meditate on death, his mind turns to the idea of the flesh, or woman, as salvation. In the priest's vision of himself as a helpless old man and in his wonderment at what any woman might feel were she able to see her child's end at its beginning, McGahern is thinking again, as he had in *The Leavetaking*, about 'Among School Children'.<sup>24</sup> The

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<sup>22</sup> McGahern, 'The Wine Breath', 120.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted by Daniel Albright, 'Notes', in Yeats, *The Poems*, 690.

<sup>24</sup> I am grateful to Michael Lally for first suggesting this linkage to me.

closing words of the story – ‘time without end’ – are a deliberate echo of the closing words of every decade of the Rosary – ‘world without end’, and thus the inversion of the world of God and the world of the flesh is reemphasized. In addition to this parallel, Horton’s ‘dear hope’ that “The inclemency / Of that or the next winter would be death” brings us back to the snow-covered Killeelan Hill and the death of Michael Bruen.

Daniel Albright, in his very useful notes to the Everyman edition of Yeats’s *Poems*, points to similarities between ‘All Souls’ Night’ and another elegy written a couple of years earlier, ‘In Memory of Major Robert Gregory’. His observations are worth quoting to shine some further light on McGahern’s story:

at the centre of each poem is a trio of ghosts, who while living experimented with various strategies for escape from the natural world, as if in anticipation of their ghostly selves. But whereas the earlier poem moved on to a fourth ghost, that of Robert Gregory, ‘All Souls’ Night’ returns immediately to the poet, who seems to be spiritualizing before the reader’s eyes – as if the poem were a funeral elegy for the elegist himself.<sup>25</sup>

‘The Wine Breath’ works in a similar fashion to ‘All Souls’ Night’ in that it is not, as perhaps it first seems, an elegy for Michael Bruen, but for the narrator of the story:

"Then, quietly, he saw that he had a ghost all right, one that he had been walking around with for a long time, a ghost he had not wanted to recognize – his own death."<sup>26</sup>

McGahern allows Major Gregory and his mother (and therefore Yeats too) a presence

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<sup>25</sup> Albright, 'Notes', in Yeats, *The Poems*, 689.

<sup>26</sup> McGahern, 'The Wine Breath', 120.

in his story 'Christmas', which features a big-house character, Mrs Grey, whose son "had been killed in aerial combat over Italy".<sup>27</sup> Another much loved Yeats poem inspired by his friendship with Lady Gregory, 'The Wild Swans at Coole', is an oblique presence in McGahern's final story, 'Love of the World'.<sup>28</sup>

In his brilliant inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford, Paul Muldoon pointed to the many ways in which 'All Souls' Night' is itself a patchwork of nods and winks to other works and other writers, most particularly to Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale'. The classical style deployed by Yeats adds layers to the significance and meaning of his poem and gives it a tolling quality that brings us back to the great Christ Church bell at the opening to 'All Souls' Night', and also to another bell that caught the interest of Muldoon in an earlier series of Oxford lectures: "the convention of a *feth fiada*, where the sound of a bell is often a signal of a moment of interface between this world and some other".<sup>29</sup> Communication between these worlds was as real and as important to McGahern as it was to Yeats, but McGahern did not need the reassurance of table-tapping séances, automatic writing or astral voyages. "People we know come and go in our minds whether they are here or in England, or alive or

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<sup>27</sup> John McGahern, 'Christmas', *Creatures of the Earth*, 19.

<sup>28</sup> The moment in question is as follows: "All sorts of blame was apportioned as we noticed each year that passed across the face of the lake, quickening and gathering speed before swinging round again, until crowds of years seemed suddenly in the air above the lake, all gathering for flight." See McGahern, 'Love of the World', *Creatures of the Earth*, 366.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 12-13. Muldoon's Clarendon Lectures of 1998-99 focus repeatedly on the Irish mythological trope of the tolling bell as a supernatural prompt. See Paul Muldoon, *To Ireland, I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

dead", remarks the sage Mary Murphy of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. And, she adds, "We're no more than a puff of wind out on the lake."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 121.

## VII

### **Bohemian Rhapsody: Patrick Kavanagh and Generation X**

I cannot die  
Unless I walk outside these whitethorn hedges.

– Patrick Kavanagh, 'Innocence'

Though Patrick Kavanagh is never directly mentioned in McGahern's fiction, he does make important appearances in two of the short stories, published fifteen years apart. The first comes in what is perhaps McGahern's funniest and most eccentric story, 'My Love, My Umbrella'. The narrator is typically McGahernesque: a nameless, deracinated man at loose in the pubs and dancehalls of Dublin. He seizes upon a fleeting opportunity to ask a woman out on a date as they listen to a band outside the Scotch House pub, and they agree to meet at a later point in Mooney's. It is here that a figure very clearly based on Kavanagh is described: "I pointed out a poet to her. I recognized him from his pictures in the paper. His shirt was open-necked inside a gabardine coat and he wore a hat with a small feather in its band". The narrator's date asks him if he can hear what the poet is saying to his companions who "continually plied him with whiskey":

He was saying he loved the blossoms of Kerr Pinks more than the roses, a man could only love what he knew well, and it was the quality of the love that mattered and not the accident. The whole table said they'd drink to that, but he glared at them as if slighted, and as if to avoid the glare they called for a round of doubles. While the drinks were coming from the bar the poet turned aside and took a canister from his pocket. The inside of the lid was coated with a white powder which he quickly licked clean. She thought it was baking soda for his stomach. We had more stout and we noticed, while each new round was coming, the poet turned away from the table to lick clean the fresh coat of soda on the inside of the canister lid.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John McGahern, 'My Love, My Umbrella', *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 59-60.

A quick glance at any contemporary reminiscence of Kavanagh towards the end of his life will confirm this description of a bright and sincere man brought down by drink, Dublin pub life and that world's attendant satellites. There is sympathy towards the poet here and a brief allusion to one of his finest poems, 'Spraying the Potatoes':

The flocks of green potato-stalks  
Were blossom spread for sudden flight,  
The Kerr's Pinks in a frivelled blue,  
The Arran Banners wearing white.<sup>2</sup>

This poem was one of McGahern's favourites, and had been alluded to almost a decade earlier in *The Barracks* when Sergeant Reegan tended to his own potato crop: "The potato stalks were a green sway of leaves in the garden, flecked with their tiny blossoms, blue of Kerr's Pinks, white of Arran Banners, red of Champions".<sup>3</sup> Just as in the poem, the poisonous bluestone used to counteract blight is transformed into something poetic and beautiful as Reegan fills his knapsack sprayer.

In the portrait of Kavanagh that we find in 'My Love, My Umbrella', there is a strong sense of disgust at the hangers on, and a rejection of the 'Dublin literary pub' lifestyle, the poet's fellow drinkers in search of what Anthony Cronin once described in deflated terms as a "bohemia of some kind".<sup>4</sup> An intriguing insight into this world and the Dublin cultural scene of the 1960s is provided in McGahern's essay about the

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Spraying the Potatoes', *Collected Poems*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 36.

<sup>3</sup> John McGahern, *The Barracks* (1963; London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 128.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Cronin, *Dead as Doornails: a chronicle of life* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press; London: Calder & Boyars, 1976), 3.

artist, writer and bibliophile Patrick Swift (1927-83).<sup>5</sup> He recounts the then London-based Swift's questions about how one might maintain a culturally diverse and rich life in Dublin:

I could answer readily enough that to go into McDaid's or any of the bars around Grafton Street on any Saturday night was enough to cure me of desire for artistic company for at least a month.

'Well, Kavanagh is at least a man of some genius. Why don't you try to see more of him?'

I told him that I had no inclination to go through the barrage of insult and abuse that seemed the necessary initiation to the doubtful joy of Kavanagh's company and that I preferred to read the work.

"I think he understood perfectly", concludes McGahern of Swift's attitude to the Monaghan poet, "the mixture of child and monster, fool and knave that went into the wayward intelligence of Kavanagh's genius."<sup>6</sup>

That high priest of the Dublin pubs – and most particularly of McDaid's of Harry Street – that Kavanagh had become by the time McGahern hit the Dublin arts scene in the late 1950s, is again vividly remembered in the 1985 short story 'Bank Holiday', another account of a Dublin love affair and perhaps the closest McGahern ever got to writing a happy story. Again, the setting is a first date in Mooney's – there were several bars of this name across Dublin at the time, though it is clear from details

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<sup>5</sup> The best account of Swift's life comes in Veronica Jane O'Mara (ed.), *PS... of course: Patrick Swift 1927-1983* (Oysterhaven: Gandon Books, 1993). Of Swift's voracious reading and love of the classics, O'Mara writes, "Patrick took to the pleasure of books with an immediate and insatiable appetite so that he had read most of the great English novels by the time he was in his teens". See *PS... of course*, 39.

<sup>6</sup> John McGahern, 'The Bird Swift', *Love of the World: Essays*, ed. Stanley van der Ziel, int. Declan Kiberd (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 67-8.



contained within the story that in this case it is The Grafton Mooney of Harry Street, just off Grafton Street and across the road from McDaid's, from which the Kavanagh character has just been barred:

It was into this quiet flow of the evening that the poet came, a large man, agitated, without jacket, the shirt open, his thumbs hooked in braces that held up a pair of sagging trousers, a brown hat pushed far back on his head. Coughing harshly and pushing the chair around, he sat at the next table.<sup>7</sup>

The poet goes on to make his presence known: "There was more sharp coughing, a scraping of feet, a sigh, muttering, a word that could have been a prayer or a curse. His agitated presence had more the sound of a crowd than the single person sitting in a chair." The narrator, Patrick McDonough, is asked by the poet to cross the street to the pub from which he has just been excluded to purchase a pack of 20 Gitanes cigarettes.<sup>8</sup> McDonough, unwilling to be the poet's lackey, but keen at the same time to do right by him, asks the potboy to go across and get the cigarettes. The poet, bested in this rather perverse dance of pub courtesy, fumes as he receives the packet: "You're a cute hoar, McDonough. You're a mediocrity. It's no wonder you get on so well in the world". McDonough's American date, Mary Kelleher, amazed by the drama and violence of the whole exchange, asks McDonough why he did not go across for the Gitanes himself. "Vanity", he replies. "I didn't want to be his messenger boy. He could

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<sup>7</sup> John McGahern, 'Bank Holiday', *Creatures of the Earth*, 309. The Grafton Mooney operated from 1886 to 1973 and is now called Bruxelles.

<sup>8</sup> McGahern chooses the name of his protagonist as a nod towards a minor poet and Guinness salesman of the Dublin mid-century, Patrick McDonough, whom, he recalls in his essay on Patrick Swift, had been on the receiving end of one of Kavanagh's infamous rants against mediocrity and phoniness. See John McGahern, 'The Bird Swift', in *Love of the World: Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 68.

go and inflate his great mouse of an ego somewhere else. To hell with him. He's always trouble".

Yet for all the chariness that McGahern felt for Kavanagh the man, his myth and milieu, he could admire him as a writer, and not just any writer, but one who had emerged from the same sort of rural quietude that had produced McGahern himself. The poet of 'Bank Holiday', admits McDonough, in spite of the boorishness and egotism, "is the best we have".<sup>9</sup> McGahern's story, as well as being, in part, about Patrick Kavanagh, borrows its title -- as does his story 'A Ballad' -- from the Monaghan poet. Kavanagh's 'Bank Holiday', like McGahern's story of the same name, is set around the summer Dublin pub scene and has the poet himself as a central character:

There he comes your alter ego  
Past the Waterloo and Searson's  
With a silly gaping mouth  
Sucking smiles from every slut,  
Sure that this is Heaven's high manna --  
God is good to Patrick Kavanagh,  
Building like a rejected lover  
Dust into an ivory tower.<sup>10</sup>

Kavanagh frequently writes thus about himself, often, as here, in a self-deprecating fashion. This preoccupation with the self is an aspect of the poet's work that is commented upon by McDonough when he lends Kavanagh's last discrete collection

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<sup>9</sup> John McGahern, 'Bank Holiday', 310, 310, 311, 309.

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Bank Holiday', *Collected Poems*, 169.

to be published, *Come Dance with Kitty Stobling* (1960), to the young American.<sup>11</sup> "I've long suspected that those very pure love sonnets are all addressed to himself", he says, to which she responds that she found some very funny. McDonough then allows himself to be serious in his praise for Kavanagh: "I'm so glad you liked them. I've lived with some of them for years".<sup>12</sup> It is clear that McGahern, too, lived with parts of the Kavanagh canon for a great part of his writing life, from Bohemian Dublin and London's Soho of the early 1960s, through stories like 'Bank Holiday' and 'My Love, My Umbrella', and then seeping prominently into passages of *Memoir*, particularly those concerning his mother.

For McGahern to point us towards a particular book is unusual, and it is worth dwelling briefly on the origins of *Come Dance With Kitty Stobling*, the book that resurrected a flagging, and almost vanished, poetic career. Key behind the publication of this last standalone collection from Kavanagh were a group of bohemian figures with whom McGahern was friendly and who would also, a year after *Come Dance*, be involved in bringing McGahern into print for the first time. Foremost among them was David Wright, the South African-born, and London-based, poet who edited the literary magazine *Nimbus* from 1955-56. Wright was friendly with the Dublin artist

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<sup>11</sup> The volume McDonough lends to her is not named, but is described as "the book with the brown cover". See McGahern, 'Bank Holiday', 317. This can only be *Come Dance with Kitty Stobling*, published by Longmans in 1960 in distinctive brown.

<sup>12</sup> McGahern, 'Bank Holiday', 317.

and confidante of Kavanagh's, Paddy Swift, and recounts his greatest coup as a literary editor courtesy of Swift:

Swift was back in Ireland, and from there posted me a thick bound volume of typescript poems with no author's name to them nor any explanation of their provenance. But it didn't take me more than two minutes to realize that these were unpublished poems by the legendary Patrick Kavanagh – I say legendary because though no English literary magazine had the nous to print his works in those days, his was a name to conjure with among the denizens of Soho, if not in the columns of the Sunday papers. These poems had been rescued by Swift's brother James, who one day invaded the poet's flat in Pembroke Road, gathered up the trampled MSS scattered about the floor, and had them sorted, typed and bound. *Nimbus* printed nineteen of them in a single issue. This was seen by the then poetry reader for Longmans, Thomas Blackburn, and led to the publication of *Come Dance with Kitty Stobling* in 1960, and to Kavanagh's subsequent, if long-delayed fame.<sup>13</sup>

Jimmy Swift -- to whom McGahern dedicates *The Barracks* -- was, for many years through the 1960s and '70s, one of the writer's closest friends and most astute readers, and McGahern was proud of the role played by Swift in the resurrection of Kavanagh, as is made clear in some unpublished, handwritten notes in the Galway archive. "I first read many of these poems in a typescript loaned to me by my friends the Swifts in the 1950's", he writes:

A small part of the intense excitement of that experience reading those poems was that they appeared more intimate and close like letters than they would between the formal covers of a book. Among the many pleasures of rereading

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<sup>13</sup> David Wright, 'Patrick Swift in London', in O'Mara (ed.), *PS... of course: Patrick Swift 1927-1983*, 180-81.

the poems in this handsome volume was the personal one of seeing James Swift's typescript listed in the table of acknowledgements.<sup>14</sup>

It would seem from these thoughts that McGahern was writing a speech to launch the Penguin *Collected Poems* of Kavanagh, edited by Antoinette Quinn and published in 2004 to mark the centenary of Kavanagh's birth.<sup>15</sup> It is worth quoting further from these notes to get a fuller sense of McGahern's lifelong admiration for the Monaghan poet. The notes begin with lines from the final stanza of Kavanagh's 'If Ever You Go to Dublin Town':

Posterity has no time  
for anything but the soul,  
the lines that speak the passionate heart,  
the spirit that lives alone

McGahern then moves into a consideration of Kavanagh's lasting value:

The statement stands as a moving description of Kavanagh's own best work, but, like most appropriations of the Big Questions, it tells us more about the poet, and particularly the type of poetry he was passionately against than it does about Posterity, which, like Parnassus, has many mansions.

He had an individual vision, a vigorous gift for capturing the rhythms of ordinary speech, and for bringing the images that move us into the light. He also reclaimed a previously unregarded world – a man shouldering home a saddle barrow, the functional ward of a chest hospital – as a subject of high poetry, without patronage and on an equal footing with the material of any other important work.

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<sup>14</sup> P71/1285 (1). Handwritten draft of part of a piece on Kavanagh beginning 'Poetry has no time for anything but the soul.' Also contains a handwritten draft of an unidentified piece of fiction beginning 'Her hair had the colour and glow of the wood of the violin when she played, brown hair with dark streaks of red, and she could play, jigs and reels'. Paginated 1-15 (n. d.).

<sup>15</sup> For the reference to James Swift's contribution, see Antoinette Quinn, 'Acknowledgements', in Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, x.

With his extraordinary physical presence and overflowing energy, watching Kavanagh sitting alone in a chair was more like watching a warring crowd than a single solitary presence. Many of these presences can be found in the *Collected Poems*: the messiah ('there are people in the street who steer by my star'), the scourge of mediocrity and dullness, the humorist, the jaunty public man, the satirist. Reading *The Paddiad* and similar poems, I could not help but bring to mind Auden's brilliant definition of satiric doggerel as presupposing no fixed laws: *It is the weapon of the outsider, the anarchist rebel who refuses to accept conventional laws or pieties as binding or worthy of respect. Hence, its childish technique, for the child represents the naïve and personal, as yet uncorrupted by education and convention.*

I do not think he ever mastered it but even here his wild swing is like no other. We can be grateful for him for what he has achieved without claiming that he can do everything, or condemning him because he cannot. His best work is individual and inexhaustible: these poems make categories like minor or major when applied to them seem like the vulgarities they most often are. What more is there to say? That,

'there were apples in the sun  
And the fields long wet with rain  
Crumple in dry winds again.'<sup>16</sup>

That closing quote is from 'Candida: For John Betjeman's Daughter', a rarely considered Kavanagh piece and one not included in his *Collected Poems*.<sup>17</sup> It concludes with a typical Kavanagh shrug of the shoulders:

Candida is one to-day  
And there's nothing more to say.

That notion of letting beauty and truth stand alone without explanation appealed as much to McGahern as it did to Kavanagh. To explain further in the face of such a truth would be vulgar.

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<sup>16</sup> P71/1310. Typescript draft titled 'Kavanagh'. Contains handwritten amendments, paginated 1-3. Reverse side contains handwritten fragments of *Memoir* (n. d.).

<sup>17</sup> 'Candida' forms part of *A Soul for Sale* (London: Macmillan, 1947).

The reclamation of an unregarded world commented upon by McGahern was also one of the aspects of Kavanagh's legacy dearest to the poet's most important and most openly adulatory literary disciple, Seamus Heaney, who commented that "Kavanagh gave you permission to dwell without cultural anxiety over the usual landmarks of your life".<sup>18</sup> One of those 'usual landmarks' McGahern allows himself to borrow comes from Kavanagh's great poem of exile, 'Kerr's Ass':

We borrowed the loan of Kerr's big ass  
To go to Dundalk with butter,  
Brought it home the evening before the market  
An exile that night in Mucker.

We heeled up the cart before the door,  
We took the harness inside –  
The straw-stuffed straddle, the broken breeching  
With bits of bull-wire tied<sup>19</sup>

The cart makes a fleeting reappearance in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* in the description of the dilapidated house and lands that the Ruttledges choose to purchase on return from London to live a life of rural simplicity:

A green gate hung from the ash tree then. From the gate a path ran between two rows of alders to the small stone house with an asbestos roof. In the grove, old moss-covered apple trees stood under the great oaks. The garden and the whitethorn hedge were completely wild. An ugly concrete porch had been tacked on to the house as a windbreak and was coming dangerously loose from

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<sup>18</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh', *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 140.

<sup>19</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Kerr's Ass', in *Collected Poems*, 173.

the stone walls. A line of stone outhouses stretched past the house. In the middle of the rusting hayshed stood a heeled-up cart.<sup>20</sup>

'Kerr's Ass' was written in England in the early 1950s at a time when Kavanagh was at a low ebb and his poetry career had floundered after the promising start of *Ploughman and Other Poems* (1936) and the groundbreaking brilliance of *The Great Hunger* (1942). Kavanagh reminds us that it is in "Ealing Broadway, London town" that he recalls his errant donkey and summons up the images of a Monaghan childhood. For the Ruttlidges, they, unlike Kerr's ass, unlike Kavanagh, have completed the journey and found their way home to a neglected and unloved farmstead, and I suspect that it is as a nod to Kavanagh and to his poetic credo of the primacy of the parish that McGahern places that 'heeled-up cart' before us anew.

McGahern states in a 1984 interview that, "I think all good writing is local in the sense of place, and I think nearly all bad writing is 'national'."<sup>21</sup> A version of this valorization of the local runs all the way through *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, as, for instance, in Jamesie's proud early claim that "I've never, never moved from here and I know the whole world".<sup>22</sup> This outlook is redolent of Kavanagh's well known placement of the parochial outlook above the provincial, a position in

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<sup>20</sup> John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002; London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 18.

<sup>21</sup> John McGahern interview with Patrick Godon, *Scrivener: A Literary Magazine*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Summer 1984). Quoted in Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 3.

<sup>22</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 7.



which national or 'Irish' writing is dismissed as bogus. It is a point of view to which he returns in a 1960 essay:

The Irish Literary Revival as it was called was responsible for many damaging lies. The 'peasant poet'. Having one's roots in the soil. [...] It was borne in on me from all sides that I was a peasant and a ploughman to boot and that anything outside the peasant in the ploughing field would not carry the authentic Irish note. [...] Then there was the all-over lie that was Ireland. Some men of genius have helped to support this lie -- Yeats and Joyce in particular. [...] Irishness is a form of anti-art.<sup>23</sup>

One way to circumvent this harmful tendency towards the national in art is to leave one's country, as Kavanagh increasingly did in his later years. And it was in bohemian London that he found shelter for a period in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Kavanagh is warm in his praise for the company, time and space provided by the English capital. "I am convinced", he writes, "that the chief place where the poetic faith is to be found is in some of the bars and clubs and cafes of Soho and also in other spots. You get enthusiastic and sincere people in all sorts of outlying districts. But the main concentration is in the Soho district".<sup>24</sup>

*X: A Quarterly Review*, the magazine which published Kavanagh's condemnation of the literary revival and 'Irish' writing, was briefly the mouthpiece of a particular strand of Soho bohemianism. Like *Nimbus*, the journal that had relaunched Kavanagh as a serious poet, it was edited by David Wright. Co-editing

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<sup>23</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'On a Liberal Education', *X: A Quarterly Review*, vol. two, no. two (August 1961), 112-13.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

with Wright was Paddy Swift, and the whole magazine has a distinctly Irish flavour. It placed Beckett on a pedestal, published McGahern's first work, and also saw contributions from Anthony Cronin, Aidan Higgins and, as we have seen, Patrick Kavanagh. One of three Kavanagh poems to be published by *X*, 'Mermaid Tavern', sees him falling in with the journal's valorization of Beckett:

Beckett's garbage-can  
Contains all our man  
Who without fright on his face  
Dominates the place  
And makes all feel  
That all is well.<sup>25</sup>

McGahern, too, was becoming an ardent admirer at this time of his Paris-based countryman, and we see Beckett as an influence across a broad array of McGahern's published work, with stories like 'Doorways' and 'Wheels' especially willing to allow the Beckettian note sound clearly. Interestingly, it is Beckett as a writer of fiction rather than as a playwright that *X* seeks first and foremost to promote. "Mr. Beckett's trilogy, now available in one volume", argues one contribution, "is the most important prose event for thirty-seven years. That it has not been received as such need surprise no-one, in view of the sort of masterpieces that are acclaimed".<sup>26</sup> The one thing from Beckett himself to appear in *X*, a two-and-a-half page sentence in French titled

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<sup>25</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Mermaid Tavern', *Collected Poems*, 240. The other Kavanagh poems first published by *X* were 'Living in the Country' and 'Lecture Hall', both in vol. 1, no. 1 (November 1959). See Antoinette Quinn's notes in Kavanagh's *Collected Poems*, 287-88.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Gerard [Anthony Cronin], 'Molloy becomes Unnameable', *X: A Quarterly Review*, vol. one, no. four (October 1960), 314.

'L'Image', also raises some intriguing possibilities with regard to cross fertilization between writers, sharing as it does its title with the closest thing McGahern leaves us to an artistic manifesto, the frequently reworked 'The Image'. Beckett's piece ends in typically ambiguous fashion, but keeps the artistic idea of 'the image' front and centre:

je me rends compte que je souris encore ce n'est plus la peine depuis longtemps  
ce n'est plus la peine, la langue ressort va dans la boue je reste comme ça plus soif  
la langue rentre la bouche se referme elle doit faire une ligne droite à présent  
c'est fait j'ai fait l'image.<sup>27</sup>

[I am aware that I am still smiling and it is no longer worth it, it's now no longer worth it, the tongue sticks out and goes into the mud I stay like that, thirstier, my tongue goes back in, the mouth closes it must make a straight line by now, it's done, I've made the image].<sup>28</sup>

It is hard not to see in all of this focus an early influence on McGahern, and it was not just through Beckett that X was interested in the image.

The following issue of the magazine sees John McGahern's name in print for the first time. He recalls it as a crucial and lucky moment in his emergence as a writer:

Nearly everything I wrote was discarded, but eventually enough work survived to be able to be shaped into a first novel. I showed it to Jimmy Swift. He liked it enough to send to his brother Patrick in London, who was editing with David Wright a magazine devoted to painting and writing called X. David Wright liked the prose and published extracts in the spring of 1960 that attracted the attention of a number of publishers.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'L'Image', *X: A Quarterly Review*, vol. one, no. four (October 1960), 37.

<sup>28</sup> I would like to acknowledge the help of Prof. Kate Marsh with this translation.

<sup>29</sup> John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 243. McGahern misremembers the date of publication here -- it was not the spring of 1960, but of 1961, when the extracts were published in X.

In their editorial commentary 'On the Margin' that came at the end of each issue, Wright and Swift see McGahern as a classical writer, uninterested in faddish experimentalism and wedded to the central need to make the image vivid and fresh:

In this number we publish a series of extracts from a novel in progress by a twenty-four year old writer. Mr John McGahern's prose seems to us distinguished not only by reason of its content but by the lucidity of its English and its spare and poetic qualities, which owe nothing to those stylistic mannerisms and gimmick Mandarinese that reviewers identify with 'poetic prose'. Once again it is a question of bringing the image that moves us out into the light, uncluttered by adjectival, philosophical or explanatory junk. True poetry lies in this rigorous faithfulness to the objects and deeper preoccupations of love.<sup>30</sup>

This passage might just as well have been written by McGahern himself, particularly in that phrase about moving the image out into the light which we have already seen McGahern use in the unpublished passage about Kavanagh's *Collected Poems* quoted earlier. He uses it again in a review of a book edited by Patrick's brother Peter, *Patrick Kavanagh: Man and Poet*: "He had an individual vision, a vigorous gift for catching the rhythms of ordinary speech, and he was able to bring the images that move us into the light without patronage and on an equal footing with any great work".<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Anonymous, [Swift and Wright], 'On the Margin', *X: A Quarterly Review*, vol. two, no. one (March 1961), 79. McGahern was 26, not 24, when this work appeared.

<sup>31</sup> John McGahern, 'Journey along the Canal Bank', review of Peter Kavanagh (ed.), *Patrick Kavanagh: Man and Poet, Love of the World*, 330-31.

Patrick Swift, writing under the pseudonym 'James Mahon', had, in an earlier issue, revealed his own fascination -- via the aesthetic theories of Thomas Aquinas -- with the image:

For the desire to get direct experience of the sensual reality of the image, to recreate and transform reality as we live it into an image which will bring tangibly before us the living mystery, may be the keynote of the sensibility of our time. [...] I would take this further and add that painting is itself precise in its ideas. In the sense that the image is the idea in its purest form and the sad unhappy muddle created by bogus methodical criticism is unjustifiable in terms of logic.

A footnote to this essay reads: "The image is a principle of our knowledge. It is that from which our intellectual activity begins, not as a passing stimulus but as an enduring foundation. -- S. Thomas Aquinas, Opusc XVI."<sup>32</sup>

There are other times, such as in the summer 1961 issue, that 'the image' and what it means for the artist becomes the central preoccupation of *X*. One essay by Georges Duthuit, entitled 'Can the Image be Abolished?', attacks 'modern', non-figurative art -- an attack entirely consistent with the general thrust of the *X* aesthetic. The same number carries a reflection by Anthony Cronin on Yeats's 'Ego Dominus Tuus' -- a poem which is especially important to McGahern -- in which he considers the significance of "the invocation to the image that will call up the anti-self" at the poem's opening.<sup>33</sup> The issue signs off with an editorial summing up in which it is

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<sup>32</sup> James Mahon, 'The Painter in the Press', *X: A Quarterly Review*, vol. one, no. four (October 1960), 305-06.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Gerard [Anthony Cronin], 'It Means What it Says', *X: A Quarterly Review*, vol. two, no. two (August 1961), 106.

declared that Duthuit's "conclusion that painting has its being ineluctably -- beginning and end -- in the image is clearly the only intellectually honest one".<sup>34</sup>

It is always instructive to look at the first appearance of a great writer in print. Nobody could have known, not least McGahern himself, that the eleven pages allotted to his work in the March 1961 issue of *X* would be the start of a brilliant literary career. Titled 'The End or the Beginning of Love: Episodes from a Novel', the extracts were never to be reissued though many of them reemerge in revised form in McGahern's second published novel, *The Dark*: as in that book you get a central character named Mahoney who is a boy growing into adolescence in rural Ireland (here he is given the first name Francie); there is a scene in which a relative who is a Catholic priest pays a visit with talk of Francie taking up a vocation; and you have a scene in which the boy's sister Josie is unhappily put into the service of a draper.<sup>35</sup>

Reading these passages from today's vantage point one can immediately isolate a style that could be described as McGahernesque. The prose is, as his editors point out, stringent and without ornament, and one can see why a magazine with such high artistic standards chose to publish this new, young writer. But to have read the extracts in 1961, perhaps more than now, one would have been struck by an affinity with

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<sup>34</sup> Anonymous, 'On the Margin', *X: A Quarterly Review*, vol. two, no. two (August 1961), 166.

<sup>35</sup> Both McGahern's father and brother were named Francis -- it is a name he never uses for a central character in his published work after *X*.

Kavanagh. The Monaghan man's epic of rural poverty, both of body and of spirit, *The Great Hunger*, is echoed in extract two, a brutal description of potato picking:

Between the lone ash trees, their branches pale as human limbs in the rain, Francie and Josie picked the potatoes. The long rows of the potatoes stretched ahead of them to the stone wall, washed clean on top by the rain and gleaming white and pink and candleyellow against the black acres of clay. The boy and girl worked without any hope of picking them all. Their clothes were leaden with rain. The wind numbed the side of the face turned towards it and great lumps of clay gathered on their boots, held together by clay and dead stalks.<sup>36</sup>

While this scene might just as easily be from Patrick MacGill or Brian Friel as from Kavanagh, in its repetition of 'clay' it brings the reader to the opening of Kavanagh's great poem:

Clay is the word and clay is the flesh  
Where the potato-gatherers like mechanized scare-crows move  
Along the side-fall of the hill -- Maguire and his men.<sup>37</sup>

*The Great Hunger* was unreservedly admired by McGahern; it was, he argued, the poem in which Kavanagh had "brought a world of his own vividly to life." "The dumb world of de Valera's dream", continues McGahern, "had been given a true voice".<sup>38</sup>

In McGahern's ability to see beauty amid the hardship of small farm life, we are transported back to Kavanagh's 'A Christmas Childhood':

One side of the potato-pits was white with frost --

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<sup>36</sup> John McGahern, 'The End or the Beginning of Love: Episodes from a Novel', *X: A Quarterly Review*, vol. two, no. one (March 1961), 38.

<sup>37</sup> Kavanagh, 'The Great Hunger', *Collected Poems*, 63.

<sup>38</sup> McGahern, 'Journey along the Canal Bank', 330.

How wonderful that was, how wonderful!<sup>39</sup>

McGahern has his fictional children -- Francie and Josie -- also experience wonderment despite the suffering they have had to go through to harvest the potatoes: "They soon tidied the face of the pit. It looked marvellous and strange in the last glimmers of light, the long pyramid sloping palely upwards to a fine edge, the potatoes along the sides washed white and gleaming like blobs of flesh through the rain".<sup>40</sup> McGahern's realization that "the novel was too flawed" to show to Faber and Faber stems in part from a fear that aspects of it, such as the above, might be seen as too derivative of Irish forerunners like Kavanagh, Yeats and Joyce.<sup>41</sup> It is telling that, though the scene of the potato gathering is reworked on several occasions in manuscript form, it does not make it into the final published version of *The Dark*.<sup>42</sup>

In trying to write about Kavanagh and his impact, McGahern was inclined towards mining one of his favourite essays, Marcel Proust's introduction to John Ruskin's meditation on reading and libraries, *Sesame and Lilies*. One two-page, handwritten document in his archive which tries to get to grips with Kavanagh sees McGahern list a dozen observations about writing. Item 10 reads as follows:

Imagination – begins where a book ends  
We ask questions – he gives desires.

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<sup>39</sup> Kavanagh, 'A Christmas Childhood', *Collected Poems*, 39.

<sup>40</sup> McGahern, 'The End or the Beginning of Love', 38.

<sup>41</sup> McGahern, *Memoir*, 244.

<sup>42</sup> See, for instance, McGahern papers, P71/32.



the moment when they have told us all they could tell us, that they create in us the feeling that they have told us nothing yet. Besides, if we put to them questions they cannot answer, we also ask from them answers that would not instruct us      Kavanagh

Sign of the love poets create in us that they make us attach literal importance to what was for them personal emotions

Drumahair and Mucker

Boat scene by Corot    moon over Keneghan<sup>43</sup>

The quotations that splice this reflection are from Proust -- it is an essay to which McGahern would repeatedly return.<sup>44</sup> Here, the chosen quotes point to Kavanagh's ability to make sacred those special places of one's young life. Kavanagh particularly gloried in being from a townland named Mucker -- the place of the pigs -- and delights in a poem like 'Kerr's Ass' in naming it. The rather more poetic 'Drumahair' forms part of Yeats's romantic geographical lexicon. And for McGahern too, that naming of places associated with his youth is a notable part of his aesthetic. "Within a circle of ten miles from the house", he recalls in his memoir, "were all the places we had known in Leitrim -- Ballinamore, the bungalow beside the forge on the outskirts of the town, Lisacarn and the lane to Lisacarn, Beaghmore, the stark house above the bog at Cloone, Aughawillan and the Aughawillan farm".<sup>45</sup> "Naming these things", Kavanagh tells us in one of his finest sonnets, 'The Hospital', "is the love act and its pledge".<sup>46</sup> And it is

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<sup>43</sup> McGahern papers, P71/1301. Handwritten draft of a piece of non-fiction, 3 pp. (n. d.), 3.

<sup>44</sup> See Marcel Proust, 'On Reading: Preface to *Sésame et les Lys*', in Proust, *On Reading Ruskin: Prefaces to La Bible d'Amiens and Sésame et les Lys with Selections from the Notes to the Translated Texts*, trans and ed. Jean Autret, William Burford, and Philip J. Wolfe; int. Richard Macksey (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 115.

<sup>45</sup> McGahern, *Memoir*, 267.

<sup>46</sup> Kavanagh, 'The Hospital', *Collected Poems*, 217.

that capturing of place that McGahern loves most in Kavanagh, particularly in the late poems that form *Come Dance with Kitty Stobling* that "are steeped in space and time while still happening in one dear, specific place".<sup>47</sup>

That sense of a one dear place is nowhere stronger than in McGahern's late prose, particularly in the memoir. And so it is not surprising that the echoes of Kavanagh that had seemed to quieten and recede in the middle period of his writing life come, anew, to the surface. One thinks particularly of poems such as 'Innocence' and 'In Memory of My Mother' in some of the more lyrical passages where McGahern tries to recall the effect that having his mother walk with him through the Leitrim lanes had on him as a boy:

When I reflect on those rare moments when I stumble without warning into that extraordinary sense of security, that deep peace, I know that consciously and unconsciously she has been with me all my life.

If we could walk together through those summer lanes, with their banks of wild flowers that "cast a spell," we probably would not be able to speak, though I would want to tell her all the local news.<sup>48</sup>

Compare this with Kavanagh's recollection of his mother who is dead but still very much alive:

I do not think of you lying in the wet clay  
Of a Monaghan graveyard; I see  
You walking down a lane among the poplars  
On your way to the station, or happily

Going to second Mass on a summer Sunday –

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<sup>47</sup> McGahern, 'Journey along the Canal Bank', 331.

<sup>48</sup> McGahern, *Memoir*, 272.

You meet me and you say:  
'Don't forget to see about the cattle –'  
Among your earthiest words the angels stray.<sup>49</sup>

Or consider the pursuit of the divine that McGahern describes in this memorable passage about his early childhood:

At times in the evening the sun appeared within reach, when it stood in the whitethorns high on the hill behind the house before disappearing. I began to watch it as I had earlier eyed the bright battering at the forge. If I could climb the hill while it rested in the whitethorns, I could walk through the sun to the gate of heaven.<sup>50</sup>

It is a sense of the transcendent, of the immortal, that one sees in Kavanagh too, replete with those same whitethorns one finds so often in McGahern and in Proust:

They laughed at one I loved –  
The triangular hill that hung  
Under the Big Forth. They said  
That I was bounded by the whitethorn hedges  
Of the little farm and did not know the world.  
But I knew that love's doorway to life  
Is the same doorway everywhere.<sup>51</sup>

These are not exact correspondences, but there is enough overlap to argue for Kavanagh's continuing presence in McGahern over the course of his writing life.

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<sup>49</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'In Memory of My Mother', *Collected Poems*, 129.

<sup>50</sup> McGahern, *Memoir*, 11. In this 'bright battering at the forge' there is also a strong echo of Gerard Manley Hopkins' 'Felix Randal': "When thou at the random grim forge, powerful amidst peers/Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal!".

<sup>51</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Innocence', *Collected Poems*, 183.

That the two writers should intersect in the pages of one of the best bohemian British literary periodicals of the twentieth century is not, perhaps, as strange as might at first seem. For, although McGahern rejected the noise and hurry of the literary pub scene, and saw, rightly, that membership of the boozy, competitive world of McDaid's was unlikely to produce much serious writing, he could also admire those, like Kavanagh, who took this world on and made it their own. "We felt an exhilaration at the possibility", he remembers of those heady Dublin and London days of the early 1960s, "that literature could belong again to the streets rather than to the Church and university and the worn establishment".<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> McGahern, 'Journey along the Canal Bank', 331.

## VIII

### **Absurdity: Camus comes to Clones**

The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.<sup>1</sup>

– Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (1942; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), 111.

On 4 January 1960 the French-Algerian philosopher and novelist, Albert Camus, was killed in a car crash near the small French town of Villeblevin. Thus ended the life of one of the most inspirational intellectual figures of the European twentieth century at the tragically early age of 46. Two months later he was fondly remembered in *X* magazine: “the loss is so great that we resent it bitterly; to measure its importance, we can ask ourselves what would have happened to the evolution of French thought and literature if, for instance, André Gide had disappeared when he was 46”. The obituary went on to paint Camus in heroic terms:

He loved men, in a world without God which compels man to assume the full weight and responsibility of life. He was himself a complete man and his mind could not work without his heart being in constant motion; he had courage in his lucidity; he had supreme integrity.<sup>2</sup>

It is unsurprising that *X* should so memorialize this great figure of twentieth-century philosophy, wedded as it was to French intellectual life and the long tradition of thinkers and writers produced by that country.

To what degree John McGahern's respect for Camus comes from his time with the writers who gathered around *X* is not possible to say, but as a bright young writer of the 1960s with a sharp and enquiring mind, he could not but have been drawn to the impact made by Camus, his interest in the absurd and the ways in which this interest is brought to the fore particularly in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and in *The*

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<sup>2</sup> Michel St. Denis, 'Remembering Two Friends', in David Wright and Patrick Swift (ed.), *X: Volume One, 1960-61* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1961), 112, 113.

*Outsider* (1942). To an even greater degree than was the case for Camus, the X circle was devoted to Samuel Beckett, the Irish writer who owes most to the Algerian philosopher, and a figure who remained important to McGahern's development throughout his writing life.<sup>3</sup> Our first prominent hint that the absurdist worldview examined by Beckett and Camus was forming a bedrock of McGahern's thinking comes in his debut novel *The Barracks*, published three years after Camus' death.

The novel tells the story of Elizabeth Reegan, wife of a garda sergeant living in a quiet country barracks, who is dying of cancer. Prior to this life she worked for several years as a nurse in London and had a passionate love affair with a Doctor Halliday, a clever but tormented intellectual, a man who might as easily have been drawn by Camus as by McGahern and who, in his love of the Mediterranean, of the sun and of the sensual world is reminiscent of Camus' most celebrated fictional creation, Meursault of *The Outsider*: "He had dreamed of bringing her to the South he'd fallen in love with in the long holidays from the universities: Chalon on the way down, Lyons, Valence, Avignon, Nîmes, Montpellier, Sete across the marshlands high above the Mediterranean".<sup>4</sup> Halliday's primary role in the novel is to act as the figure who first brings Elizabeth to consciousness, an ever present preoccupation of McGahern's:

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<sup>3</sup> The best treatment of the interplay between Beckett and McGahern yet published can be found in Denis Sampson, *Young John McGahern: Becoming a Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> John McGahern, *The Barracks* (1963; London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 93. It is tempting to see in McGahern's choice of name for this absurdist hero a suitably perverse joke and a nod towards the French rock star Johnny Hallyday whose debut album *Hello Johnny* was released in 1960.

Always she saw people in the light of her own consciousness, and would she be listening quietly to this doctor and seeing nothing if she'd never met Halliday? Would she be better or worse off now if she hadn't met him? Consciousness, awareness, even vision lay within herself, but it was he who had shaken them awake, if she'd never met him they might have slept a lifetime.<sup>5</sup>

McGahern believed that those humans who have come to consciousness are in a distinct minority. In some senses, it is this belief that lies at the heart of *The Barracks*: Elizabeth appears to be the only conscious character in the novel; while her brutish husband blinds himself with hatred and hard work, the other guards and their wives spend their time in idle gossip or listening to distant football matches on the wireless.

For Camus, to be conscious is to be in pain but with the potential, as my epigraph from *The Myth of Sisyphus* suggests, to be happy. To be conscious is to be fully human and to be heroic. Camus' great archetype of such heroism he draws from Greek myth in the figure of Sisyphus who is condemned by the gods to forever push a great rock up a hill only for it to roll down the far side to be pushed up again in eternal repetition. "If this myth is tragic," he writes, "that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks and this fate is no less absurd."<sup>6</sup> *The Barracks* abounds with descriptions of tiresome, repetitive work, from Sergeant Reegan's interminable saving of the turf which he hopes will in turn rescue him from his accursed job as a policeman, to the utterly

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<sup>5</sup> McGahern, *The Barracks*, 209.

<sup>6</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 109.



pointless patrols mounted by the guards on the country roads of a district which is, to all intents and purposes, free of crime. There is one scene, in particular, where Camus is almost directly brought to the fore, and it involves the painfully conscious Elizabeth torturing herself as she pushes her bicycle up a hill in Sisyphean labour:

'Why are you pushing this bike, Elizabeth?'  
'To go home, of course!'  
'But why do you want to get home?'  
'Because I want to get home!'  
'But why?'  
'That's the why!'  
'That's a stupid child's answer!' [...]  
'All answers are stupid and questions too,' the game continued in her head. 'I am pushing the bike because I am pushing because I am pushing. I am going home because I am going home because I am going home.'  
'But you must have some reason!'  
'I want to go home.'  
'But why?'  
'But why?'  
'But why ask? That's it: why ask? I'm going home. I'm alive. That's obvious, isn't it?'<sup>7</sup>

Yet in all her pain and doubt, we as readers are invited to admire this dying woman, and she becomes McGahern's most compelling and sympathetic absurdist hero. Where Halliday fails to be Sisyphean in that we cannot imagine him happy, Elizabeth is capable of moments of intense, joyful insight in the midst of her inevitably failing fight with the absurdity of her coming death. Camus writes of Sisyphus that his "scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing".

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<sup>7</sup> McGahern, *The Barracks*, 96.

Elizabeth labours under the same knowledge of nothingness, of a complete absence of meaning, but, like Sisyphus, she shoulders the responsibility with grace and realizes as an intelligent, conscious human that "This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth".<sup>8</sup>

We see the same struggle with nihilism take place in *The Pornographer*. The coming to consciousness -- or what James Joyce might have described as the birth of the soul -- is, again, seen as something difficult and painful. But without it there must remain a doubt as to one's full humanity. This novel, far more than anything else McGahern published, allows itself to think aloud and to witness the interior workings of the eponymous pornographer Michael's troubled mind:

We can no more learn from another than we can do their death for them or have them do ours. We have to go inland, in the solitude that is both pain and joy, and there make our own truth, and even if that proves nothing too, we have still that hard joy of having gone the hard and only way there is to go, we have not backed away or staggered to one side, but gone on and on and on even when there was nothing, knowing there was nothing on any other way.<sup>9</sup>

Camus' Sisyphus is again the model here. That there will be no victory is unimportant, it is in that inland journey to self-realization itself that value lies. "Sisyphus", like the pornographer, "knows the whole extent of his wretched condition [...] The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory".<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 108.

<sup>9</sup> John McGahern, *The Pornographer* (1979; London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 203.

<sup>10</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 109.

While the whole plot surrounding the love affair between the pornographer and Josephine is reminiscent of Meursault's nonchalant passivity towards Marie in *The Outsider*, another of Camus' preoccupations that is writ large throughout *The Pornographer* is the workings of chance.<sup>11</sup> In his afterword to *The Outsider*, Camus famously wrote that Meursault is condemned to death because he refuses to conform to society's rules. "A long time ago," he writes, "I summed up *The Outsider* in a sentence which I realize is extremely paradoxical: 'In our society any man who doesn't cry at his mother's funeral is liable to be condemned to death.' I simply meant that the hero of the book is condemned because he doesn't play the game".<sup>12</sup> And when Meursault, as a condemned man, awaits his fate in the prison cell, his mind turns to game playing and to gambling. He feels he might draw succour from the idea that there is even a remote possibility that the mechanism of the guillotine might fail, "that once, if only once, in that inexorable march of events, chance or luck had played a happy part. Just once!" "What was wanted", thinks Meursault shortly afterwards, "was to give the criminal a chance, if only a dog's chance; say, one chance in a thousand".<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> John Updike was the first to note in print similarities between *The Pornographer* and Camus: "our hero comes to suggest *l'étranger* in tweeds, droning like some Hibernian Camus". See Updike, 'An Old-Fashioned Novel', *The New Yorker* (24 December 1979); reprinted in Updike, *Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 392.

<sup>12</sup> Albert Camus, 'Afterword' (1955), in Camus, *The Outsider*, trans. Joseph Laredo, int. Peter Dunwoodie (1942; London: Everyman's Library, 1998), 115.

<sup>13</sup> Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, trans. Stuart Gilbert, int. Cyril Connolly (1942; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 108, 109. It is to this edition all future footnotes refer.

Similarly, *The Pornographer* returns again and again to the idea of life having the random and absurd quality of a game or a casino -- even the act of dying itself is described by the novel's central protagonist as "not playing the game". From the very first page of the book we are presented with images of gambling as the pornographer and his uncle sit in a bar discussing the terminal illness of the pornographer's aunt which runs as a parallel plot throughout the novel alongside the grotesquely failed romance. The men are shown "at a table just inside the door, out of range of the television high in the corner which was showing horses being led round a parade ring before the start of some race". The evening at the dancehall where the protagonist meets his lover and which drives the whole action of the novel happens entirely by chance:

Like spinning a coin or wheel I'd let the number of the bus decide the evening. If it turned out to be the fifty-four-A I'd get on and go back to the room and do the work I'd been putting off; if it was any of the other buses I'd turn back into the city and squander the evening. With a calmness now that I was within the rules of a game I stood at the stop and waited.

When the pornographer's lover recounts how she lost her virginity, she tells a tale of disappointment and shame caught in the shadow of an absurd gamble:

There was I with all these jumbled, mixed-up emotions racing all round in me, I had waited for this moment all my life, and now it had happened, I had given myself to a man. And he reached across and looked at his watch and turned on the transistor, 'The racing results will be coming on in a minute,' he said, and I couldn't believe it. He got up, put on his clothes, pulled back the armchair, just socks on his feet, ticking off the results on the racing page as they were announced. I started to cry, stuffing the bedclothes to my face so that he wouldn't hear. And then when I heard the time signal for the news and saw him still sitting

without the slightest movement in the chair, I stopped the crying, and I asked him what he was thinking. If he had made any reference to what had happened, just the barest word, I think it would have been all right, but you know what he said, all that he said was, I can still hardly believe it, 'I've just missed the crossed treble by a whisker'.

When, later in the book, the pornographer travels to London to put a final stop to the relationship with his now pregnant lover, it is not by chance that McGahern has them make love a last time within earshot of the cheering crowd at Tottenham Hotspur's White Hart Lane. With a passivity and ennui worthy of Meursault, the pornographer prompts that last, joyless sexual liaison: "'We might as well go to bed,' I said as an enormous roar that sounded as if a home goal had just been scored rolled through the shabby room".<sup>14</sup>

Are there hints here too in that roaring crowd of the closing lines of *The Outsider* when Meursault hopes that "on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration"?<sup>15</sup> Perhaps; and I think it is even more likely that McGahern is returning to the central question of *The Myth of Sisyphus* -- whether one ought to commit suicide or not -- when he has the pornographer's lover describe the cremation of her London admirer Jonathan's wife:

O boy, will I ever forget that funeral service out in Golders Green. Apparently she used to gamble a lot. And she owned a racehorse once. And eight was her lucky number. This enormous floral wreath in the figure of eight -- it must have

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<sup>14</sup> McGahern, *The Pornographer*, 68, 9, 20, 41, 189.

<sup>15</sup> Camus, *The Outsider*, 120.

cost the earth -- went through the flap with the coffin. She'd put it in the will. They'd to hold it so that the flap didn't sweep it off.

The woman had committed suicide, thus, hopes the pornographer, leaving the way open for his ex-lover and soon to be mother of his child to marry Jonathan and be conveniently taken off his hands. The description of the funeral is as close as McGahern allows himself to stray into the purely absurd: suicide, lucky numbers, the searing flames of the crematorium. It is all gleefully Beckettian.

Suicide appears prominently in McGahern on one other occasion, via the opening story of his debut collection, *Nightlines* (1970). 'Wheels' was written in the late 1960s and though very slightly revised between first publication and reappearance in the *Collected Stories* (1992), McGahern kept faith with it to the end. We can deduce this from the fact that it is placed at the beginning of *Nightlines*, again twenty-two years later as the first story in *The Collected Stories*, and, once more opens the final anthology of the best stories, *Creatures of the Earth* (2006). Other stories were not accorded the same respect, with several, such as 'Peaches', 'The Stoat' and 'Doorways' not making it into the final collection, and some others changing order of appearance over the years. 'Wheels', then, might be read as a kind of *credo*, and contains within it many of the tropes that McGahern would return to over the course of his writing life, not least the notion that each part of one's life is the section of a wheel that cannot be stopped. This idea finds its most elegant and memorable iteration in *The Pornographer* when Michael passes his dying aunt's hospital window on a date with the very nurse who

is caring for her, and thinks how "one day my wheel would turn into her section".<sup>16</sup> For McGahern, meditation on the turning of the wheel and its consequences is not always so lyrical, and in 'Wheels' he opens with an overheard conversation between two railway porters about the botched suicide of a colleague. The comic absurdity of it all is deeply reminiscent of Beckett's tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, and their consideration of suicide as a means of passing the time in *Waiting for Godot*. The unnamed narrator of 'Wheels' saves up the overheard tale to retell his drinking friend, Lightfoot, who acts as a kind of chorus: "'Looked at with the mind, life's a joke; and felt, it's a tragedy and we know cursed nothing,' he'd said last night over pints of Guinness".<sup>17</sup>

That idea of a life in which we know nothing, in which the choices we make become a kind of irrelevancy, or in which choice itself is an illusion, is at the heart of the absurdist view of the world. When Meursault's boss offers him the chance of a promotion to the company's Paris office in *The Outsider*, Meursault is nonplussed and answers that he does not care one way or the other. The boss is peeved, and asks if a change of life does not appeal: "I answered that one never changed one's real life; anyhow; one life was as good as another and my present one suited me quite well."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> McGahern, *The Pornographer*, 182-83, 172.

<sup>17</sup> John McGahern, 'Wheels', *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Camus, *The Outsider*, 48.

The boss is outraged, and accuses Meursault of a lack of ambition, thus betraying his own failure to become fully conscious. McGahern's characters frequently share with Meursault this realization that one decision might just as well be taken as its opposite, and that any feeling of control we might have over our lives is a foolish vanity. In 'Doorways' McGahern makes the clearest nod of his career at Beckett with two Abbey Street tramps his narrator names Bartleby and Barnaby who live a life of absurd repetition moving from doorway to doorway, bin to bin.<sup>19</sup> Just as Meursault realizes that one life is really the same as any other, so too the narrator of 'Doorways', after failing in his pursuit of love, understands that "everything seemed to be without shape. I understood nothing. Perhaps we had come to expect too much. Neither Barnaby nor Bartleby would tell. They didn't know. They just lived it".<sup>20</sup> 'Like All Other Men' ends in similar fashion: having met a woman who agrees, without fuss, to sleep with him on a first date and takes the initiative in suggesting they find a hotel for the night, the narrator just as quickly loses her when she tells him that she is, that very day, to enter religious life in a convent. It is a devastating blow, and he finds himself after they part aimlessly wandering the streets of Dublin. "Thinking of her", concludes the story, "he found himself walking eagerly towards the Busaras... but almost as quickly his walking slowed. His steps grew hesitant, as if he was thinking

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<sup>19</sup> 'Bartleby' is, of course, another writerly nod, this time to one of McGahern's favourite fictional characters, the scrivener of Hermann Melville's late story. For an incisive treatment of McGahern's engagement with Melville, see Adam Bargroff, 'I don't mind at all': The Case of Bartleby in Ireland', *English Language Notes*, vol. 52, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2014), 97-112.

<sup>20</sup> John McGahern, 'Doorways', *The Collected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 177.



of turning back. He knew that no matter how eagerly he found himself walking in any direction it could only take him to the next day and the next".<sup>21</sup>

Life, then, is, as McGahern so pointedly and poignantly puts it in 'The Creamery Manager', like "Clones in some other light".<sup>22</sup> It is a game that we may occasionally win, but might just as easily lose. Either way it doesn't matter. We might just as well enter the casino, close our eyes and spin the wheel, a realization that dawns on the eponymous manager of the story when he, too, like Camus' Meursault finds himself with time to kill in the prison cell: "Do you think people can change, Ned? he felt like asking Casey. Do you think people can change or are they given a set star at birth that they have to follow? What part does luck play in the whole shemozzle?"<sup>23</sup> To imagine oneself in control of one's life in an absurd world is a vanity that will always lead to destruction and pain.

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<sup>21</sup> John McGahern, 'Like All Other Men', *Creatures of the Earth*, 236.

<sup>22</sup> John McGahern, 'The Creamery Manager', *Creatures of the Earth*, 236. Clones is the County Monaghan town that annually hosts the Ulster gaelic football final. A trip to that final and its consequences lies at the heart of 'The Creamery Manager'.

<sup>23</sup> McGahern, 'The Creamery Manager', 236.

## IX

### Aristocracy:

#### Andrew Marvell, W. B. Yeats and the Curse of Cromwell

No Scene that turns with Engines strange  
Does oftner then these Meadows change,  
For when the Sun the Grass hath vext,  
The tawny Mowers enter next;  
Who seem like Israaliies to be,  
Walking on foot through a green Sea.  
To them the Grassy Deeps divide,  
And crowd a Lane to either Side.

With whistling Sithe, and Elbow strong,  
These Massacre the Grass along:  
While one, unknowing, carves the Rail,  
Whose yet unfeather'd Quils her fail.  
The Edge all bloody from its Breast  
He draws, and does his stroke detest;  
Fearing the Flesh untimely mow'd  
To him a Fate as black forebode.

– Andrew Marvell, 'Upon Appleton House'

Just before the death of his mother, when he was aged nine, John McGahern and his siblings were moved from the small house that they had shared with her in Aughawillan, County Leitrim and into the garda barracks at Cootehall, County Roscommon, home and workplace of their father. That move, the breaking apart of the beds with hammers to get them out of the house, the loading of the truck for the trip to Cootehall, troubles the heart of both *The Leavetaking* and of *Memoir*. That small crossroads village on the river Boyle was to be McGahern's home until he left it as a young man for Dublin and St Patrick's teacher training college. The barracks in which he lived became one of the most important and fertile wellsprings of his imagination and gave the title and location for his first published novel. He describes it thus in *Memoir*: "Below the bridge was the barracks and the large barrack garden. An avenue with a single line of sycamores ran from the road to the barracks and continued under the high stone archway before climbing between the thick banks of laurel to Lenihan's Bawn".

Cootehall takes its name from the residence of a notorious Cromwellian general and settler, Chidley Coote. The young McGahern, living next to the still extant ceremonial archway leading into the long ago ruined home of Coote, could not but have been intrigued by the history of the place and the provenance of its name. "All that remained of Chidley Coote's old castle", he remembers, "was a corner tower where the Cannons lived between the Finans and the Lenihans. There were many

stories about the Cootes, who once owned everything around Cootehall".<sup>1</sup> As McGahern recalls, stories of these brutal Cromwellian settlers and their wanton cruelty were commonly told in this pocket of County Roscommon well into the twentieth century.

Some of the most vivid descriptions of the savagery associated with Cootehall come in *Woodbrook* (1974), David Thomson's charming account of his time spent as a tutor among the Kirkwoods, one of the last of the old colonial class still extant in Roscommon into the 1930s and '40s. Phoebe Kirkwood, the adolescent daughter of the house with whom Thomson falls in love, having read *The Wind in the Willows*, is amused by the notion that Coote of Cootehall might be something akin to Toad of Toadhall, but, as Thomson recalls, she is soon disabused of this childish idea:

As soon as we heard it for the first time -- from Joe Fryer, I think, while he was shoeing horses -- we heard it again and again from everyone. Joe's brother, Jack, who worked on the farm, had one gruesome story, the Ardcarne gravedigger another, Tom Clancy a publican-farmer a mile away, who became one of my best friends, the four Maxwell brothers and even the children at Woodbrook National School each loved to tell of the dreadful deeds of the Cootes. Cromwell's were remembered in a vague and general way, the Cootes' in detail, but I have never discovered which Coote it was that did which deed.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to suggest here that this widespread local consciousness of Cromwellian military might and power in the Cootehall of his childhood led McGahern in later

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<sup>1</sup> John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 26.

<sup>2</sup> David Thomson, *Woodbrook* (1974; London: Vintage, 2001), 117.

years to an interest in one of Republican England's most important literary chroniclers, Andrew Marvell, and in particular to his great pastoral poem *Upon Appleton House*.<sup>3</sup>

Just as David Thomson arrived at Woodbrook to tutor the daughter of a high ranking British Army officer, Major Kirkwood, so too did Marvell come to Appleton House to tutor a young woman, Mary, thirteen-year-old daughter of Thomas Lord Fairfax, the recently retired supreme commander of the new model army. *Upon Appleton House*, written in 1651-52 as a monument to Fairfax, describes the general's retirement to his Yorkshire estates at Nun Appleton and is markedly pro-parliamentarian in tone.<sup>4</sup> It is, reckons one critic, "the great country-house poem" of the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup> It is a long poem and need not detain us in its entirety, but the section I have quoted in my epigraph to this chapter, in which an army of mowers set to knocking Fairfax's meadows, bears some striking similarities to a description of haymaking in *Amongst Women*:

The forecasts promised several days of hot weather and because he had help in the house Moran decided to cut all the meadows. For hours they heard the clatter of the mowing arm circling the fields, the roar of the tractor closing and moving away. When Moran did not come in for his tea Rose and Maggie brought a can of sweetened tea and sandwiches out into the fields. They walked over the swards of two cut meadows. Only a thin strip was still standing in the centre of the third meadow and they waited on the headland, watching the grass shiver and fall in front of the arm. Two young hares bounded free as the grass narrowed

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<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Adam Bargroff for first suggesting a possible allusion in *Amongst Women* to this poem.

<sup>4</sup> There is some controversy about the exact dating of the poem. On this, see Derek Hirst and Steven N. Zwicker, 'High Summer at Nun Appleton, 1651: Andrew Marvell and the Lord Fairfax's Occasions', *Historical Journal*, vol. 36, no. 2 (1993), 247-69.

<sup>5</sup> Blair Worden, *Literature and Politics in Cromwellian England: John Milton, Andrew Marvell, Marchamont Nedham* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 54.

into the last sward. 'They just got out in the nick of time,' Rose said with relief. 'Daddy hates to kill them but they can't be seen in the grass.' The young hares paused in bewilderment for a moment after they had run clear but then, seeing the roaring tractor turning once again, they bounded from the field and were gone. Moran noticed the waiting women as he circled and as soon as he cut the last sward he stopped the engine. The cut field looked completely empty and clean. As Rose and the girls were crossing the swards to the tractor they almost stumbled over a hen pheasant sitting on her nest. They were startled that she didn't fly until they saw feathers on the swards. The legs had been cut from under her while she sat. Her eyes were shining and alive. A taut stillness over the neck and body, petrified in her instinct.<sup>6</sup>

While McGahern describes the sad death of a pheasant under the blade of the mowing machine, in *Upon Appleton House* it is a young rail (most likely a corncrake, then still plentiful in England's summer meadows) who suffers the fate as it is caught in the arc of a labourer's swinging scythe; unable to flee, its 'yet unfeather'd Quills her fail'.

A very similar scene is replayed in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. This time all the animals escape the mower's blade, much to Rutledge's relief. Like the scythesman of Marvell's poem he knows that to kill one of God's creatures is an ill omen:

Rutledge was ready for cutting. As he swung the mower round to connect to the drive shaft, he felt some apprehension but no excitement. He had not grown up with machines and got none of the pleasure he saw young men take in their power; neither would he ever be as skilful and confident in their use. He knew the basic mechanics and the danger of the blurring speed of those small blades. The morning wind from the lake that lifted the curtains had died. The water was like glass, reflecting the clear sky on either side of a sparkling river of light from a climbing sun. Not a breath of wind moved on the meadows. The only movement was the tossing of the butterflies above the restful grass. The idling tractor stilled the insect hum but not the clamour of the crows or the shrieks of

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<sup>6</sup> John McGahern, *Amongst Women* (1990; London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 158-59.

the lake gulls. Once the mower was in gear and turned up to full throttle it drowned every sound. In a cocoon of noise and dust and diesel fumes and the dull, reflected heat from the metal, he sat at the wheel while the tractor and mower circled and circled the meadow, the grass falling in front of the blurring whine of the blades. Out of a corner of an eye he saw hares escaping and a hen-pheasant leading her small band of young across the swards towards the dubious safety of a deep drain.

As in *Upon Appleton House*, the meadows are compared to the sea and there is a biblical timbre to both passages. Marvell's mowers 'seem like Israaliies to be, Walking on foot through a green Sea'. And this image of the Red Sea parted to help lead God's people to the Promised Land is also hinted at by McGahern in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*:

When all the meadows were cut they looked wonderfully empty and clean, the big oak and ash trees in the hedges towering over the rows of cut grass, with the crows and the gulls descending in a shrieking rabble to hunt frogs and snails and worms. In corners of the meadows, pairs of plump pigeons were pecking busily at grass seed. No pheasant or hare had been killed or maimed. With the sea of grass gone, the space between the house and the lake suddenly seemed a different land.<sup>7</sup>

Of course Marvell is far from the only writer or artist who might inspire McGahern in his own efforts at doing justice to the annual ritual of haymaking. An admirer of Constable, for instance, he might just as easily be thinking of a painting like 'The Hay

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<sup>7</sup> John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002; London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 110-11, 111.

Wain', but there are reasons beyond the butchered rail to see a quiet nod towards Marvell, and this is particularly so in *Amongst Women*.<sup>8</sup>

If *Upon Appleton House* is the great country-house poem of the seventeenth century, one might argue that *Amongst Women* is one of the best such novels of the twentieth century. Both works revolve around military men who have entered country retirement in the wake of bitter civil wars, both are pastorals flecked with a harsh tint of cruel reality. If Moran is not a General, nor his house and lands on the scale of Fairfax's Nun Appleton, there are still hints in the novel that he thinks of himself as above his fellows, part of a kind of silent nobility. And he has handed this sensibility on to his loyal, if frequently persecuted, daughters. "On the tides of Dublin or London", we are told of these women on the second page of the novel, "they were hardly more than specks of froth but together they were the aristocratic Morans of Great Meadow, a completed world, Moran's daughters".<sup>9</sup> The Morans are aristocratic in the sense that they think of themselves as above their peers, but also in the manner in which Seamus Heaney memorably described his own family as he grew up in rural south Derry: "The Heaneys were aristocrats, in the sense that they took for granted a code of behaviour that was given and unspoken. Argumentation, persuasion, speech itself, for God's sake, just seemed otiose and superfluous to them." "Either you were

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<sup>8</sup> McGahern writes about his admiration for Constable in 'The Bird Swift', *Love of the World: Essays*, ed. Stanley van der Ziel, int. Declan Kiberd (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 65-74.

<sup>9</sup> McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 2.



an initiate of the code", he concludes, "or you weren't".<sup>10</sup> All of McGahern's novels and stories are brilliant meditations on this Irish rural system of manners, silences and deep buried courtesies.

Critics have remarked on McGahern's interest in Protestant Big House culture in stories like 'Eddie Mac' or 'Oldfashioned', and in his avowed indebtedness to the Moroneys, a local Protestant family who gave him the run of their library as a boy at a time when books were hard come by and reading generally frowned upon as a kind of idleness.<sup>11</sup> But Moran is no Protestant -- much as he admires their rectitude and work ethic -- and his sense of self comes more from his success as an IRA commander than from any religious or class standing.<sup>12</sup> While he rules Great Meadow through tyranny and fear, his powerful bearing has filled his daughters, if not his sons, with a sense of separateness that can only be renewed in the shadow of their big country house:

For the girls the regular comings and goings restored their superior sense of self, a superiority they had received intact from Moran and which was little acknowledged by the wide world in which they had to work and live. That unexamined notion of superiority was often badly shaken and in need of restoration each time they came home.

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Michael Hofmann, 'A Big Life', review of Seamus Heaney, *New Selected Poems 1988-2013*, *London Review of Books*, vol. 37, no. 11 (4 June 2015), 10.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Belinda McKeon, "'Robins Feeding with the Sparrows': The Protestant 'Big House' in the Fiction of John McGahern", *Irish University Review*, vol. 35, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2005), 72-89.

<sup>12</sup> Moran's admiration for Protestants was shared by McGahern's father who "considered them superior in every way to the general run of his fellow Catholics, less devious, morally more correct, more honest, better mannered, and much more abstemious". See McGahern, *Memoir*, 171.

And while that sense of ennoblement and entitlement can work to strengthen the Moran women, at its worst it creates a biting feeling of snobbery and caste distinction, as becomes clear in the visit to Great Meadow of Mark, an Irish labourer with whom Maggie Moran has fallen in love in London:

That evening they all went out together to a pub. Mark was charming, a good-looking man with three young women, and he drank several pints, remaining in good spirits throughout the evening. Maggie drank beer as well. Both her sisters soon saw past the good looks and glittering jacket to the kind of people he came from, the small-town poor. They felt a little sorry for him.

"We are made up at last", remarks Moran to Rose, as the young people drive away from Great Meadow on one such night out: "We'll have the town poor in the family next."<sup>13</sup>

Moran is proved right in time: Maggie's marriage to Mark is not an easy one and she is relied on to raise not just her children but to look after her husband into the bargain. The aristocratic instinct that fears the mixing of castes, the marriage of bad with good blood, held an abiding fascination for McGahern that we see as early as *The Barracks* when Guard Casey is unwilling to fulfil his wife's longing for a child by adopting. "If you had a child or something you'd be better able to knuckle down!" she pleads to Elizabeth Reegan, "But when you have nothin', that's the thing!". But her husband will not countenance the risk of introducing bad blood: "I was at Ned to

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<sup>13</sup> McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 93, 134, 139.

adopt one out of the Home but he wouldn't hear of it. They'd have bad blood or wild, their father's or mother's blood, he said".<sup>14</sup> The same fears run through what is perhaps McGahern's single favourite Yeatsian text, the late play *Purgatory*. McGahern, as we have seen, is unusual among post-Yeats Irish writers -- indeed among readers of Yeats in general -- in seeing the plays as equally worthy of study as the poems. He is right in thinking that, in some quarters, there is "a distinct embarrassment about the plays", but in unpublished notes he made towards a lecture on *Purgatory*, he writes that Yeats's dramas "can stand free in their own right, not just interesting asides".<sup>15</sup>

*Purgatory* is the best known artistic treatment of Yeats's late interest in eugenics. A long way from his early, more orthodox plays, it is much closer to Beckett than to Synge in its starkness and starlit clarity. The play sees a father and son standing in the shadow of a burnt and ruined big house, as the boy remarks:

The floor is gone, the windows gone,  
And where there should be roof there's sky

We quickly discover that the man's father, the boy's grandfather, was responsible for the burning of the house in a drunken fit. He had married the daughter of the house in a match doomed to disaster -- this ill fated mixing of classes is Yeats's central, controversial theme. The man, painfully conscious that he himself is the product of this disastrous coupling of high with low castes, ends the play by murdering his son

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<sup>14</sup> McGahern, *The Barracks*, 167.

<sup>15</sup> McGahern Papers, P71/1288, n.p. [1].

in an effort to stop the corrupted bloodline, having confessed to the boy that he was responsible for stabbing his drunken father too:

I killed that lad because had he grown up  
He would have struck a woman's fancy,  
Begot, and passed pollution on.

The man has more regard for the house than for his blood kindred, and murdered his father because

he killed the house; to kill a house  
Where great men grew up, married, died,  
I here declare a capital offence.<sup>16</sup>

While there are echoes in *Amongst Women* of that declining aristocracy portrayed in *Purgatory*, those reminders are present even more clearly in the story 'Oldfashioned' which follows the fall of two houses, both Anglo-Irish, though of differing rank. The bulk of the story follows the fortunes of yet another retired soldier, Colonel Sinclair, and his wife who return after the Second World War to the old Protestant manse in Ardcarne where the Colonel was born. In making this return they are swimming against a powerful tide as the opening paragraph outlines:

The Protestants had so dwindled that there was no longer a living in Ardcarne: the old Georgian parsonage had been closed, its avenue of great beech trees, the walled orchard, the paddock and lawn and garden, all let run wild. The church with its Purser windows was opened once every year for harvest thanksgiving to keep certain conditional endowments. There was always a turnout on that one Sunday, from the big farms and houses, gamekeepers and stewards of the Rockingham estate, and some years Sir Cecil and Lady Stafford King-Harmon

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<sup>16</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Purgatory*, in *Selected Plays*, ed., int. and notes A. Norman Jeffares (London and Sydney: Pan Books, 1974), 220, 226, 221.

came from the Nash house above Lough Key, in which there were so many windows it was said there was one for every day of the year.

The Sinclairs return to this parsonage, bring it back to life, and befriend the central character of the story, a local boy and son of the Garda sergeant. This friendship and the misguided desire of the Colonel to help the boy get a commission in the British Army leads, ultimately, to social embarrassment and disappointment. The story ends with the return of the boy -- now a television producer -- to his home place to make a documentary. Once more, the old parsonage has been abandoned: "The camera panned slowly away from the narrator to the house, and continued along the railings that had long lost their second whiteness [...] the flaked white paint of the paddock railing, the Iron Mountains smoky and blue as they stretched into the North against the rim of the sky".

Within this story of the changing fortunes of an Anglo-Irish Protestant family is the story of another such family, the aristocratic Stafford King-Harmons. While the Sinclair house suffers a kind of slow, natural death, Rockingham, the great, Nash-designed house of the King-Harmons is, like Yeats's house in *Purgatory*, razed to the ground in an act, it is strongly believed, of arson. The description of the burnt out ruin is reminiscent of Yeats's 'And where there should be roof there's sky': "All that remained of the front of the house overlooking the lake and islands was the

magnificent shell and portals, now full of sky and dangerous in high winds".<sup>17</sup> The King family, like the Cootes of Cootehall, were Cromwellian settlers who did very well out of the mid-seventeenth-century seizures of Catholic land. Rockingham was a real presence in McGahern's youth as the Ascendancy enjoyed a last flourish before succumbing to the weight of life in the young, decolonized state:

Sir John Maffey, the British Ambassador, came every year for the annual pheasant shoot in Rockingham. This was a high point in the life of the barracks. Armed detectives came from Dublin to protect the Ambassador. When I brought the tea down to the dayroom, I was startled to see their revolvers lying around among the ledgers on the big trestle table while they played cards. My father and all the guards, except the barracks orderly, attended the shoot and the grand ball that was held in Rockingham House, when all the Anglo-Irish gentry gathered for miles around.

At the end of the shoot, a gamekeeper came each year to the barracks with a brace of pheasants for my father and a single pheasant for each of the guards, a card *With the compliments of Sir Cecil and Lady Stafford King-Harmon* attached to the legs.

These memories provide an arresting corrective to any comfortable or complacent view of a mid-century 'de Valera's Ireland', dominated by inward looking nationalist zealots, but it is easy to see how such cooperation between state and former colonial master would rankle with some. McGahern recalls the particular hatred his school master bore for the children of the Rockingham estate workers -- a hatred memorably fictionalized by him in his screenplay *The Rockingham Shoot* -- who were brutally and unfairly beaten because of their association with the Ascendancy. "One of the ironies",

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<sup>17</sup> John McGahern, 'Oldfashioned', *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 237, 262, 254.

writes McGahern, of this grudge, "was that he expected us to climb on the grass margins and to salute him when he passed in his car as if he was a member of a new aristocracy."<sup>18</sup> Designed in 1810, Rockingham House was burned on the night of 10 September 1957 -- much of the estate is today a forest park. Though there is no suggestion that a marriage between different levels of the caste system led to the fall of Rockingham, the house's presence and its fiery end likely stoked McGahern's interest in Yeats's tale of big house demise.

For Yeats, the decline of the ascendancy class in the years before and after Irish independence was a disaster. Specifically, he was troubled by the slow death of Coole Park, the house and estate of the Gregory family in south County Galway. As early as 1909 and 'Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation', Yeats was taking the side of the landed aristocracy over the peasantry. What Coole meant to him and, more pointedly, what its fall represented, is memorably described in two of his greatest elegies, 'Coole Park, 1929' and 'Coole and Ballylee, 1931'. Like the boy of 'Oldfashioned' for whom the Sinclair house represents order, luxury and silence, Coole was for Yeats a place of "loveliness and ease", full of "Great rooms where travelled men and children found content or joy".<sup>19</sup> *Purgatory* is in part a product of Yeats's despair at the ascendancy's decline in the new Ireland, as is a poem from the same period as that play's composition, 'The Curse of Cromwell'. Cromwell, though

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<sup>18</sup> McGahern, *Memoir*, 167, 168.

<sup>19</sup> From W. B. Yeats, 'Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation' and 'Coole and Ballylee, 1931', in *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, 2001), 145, 294.

responsible for the landholdings of many of the great families and their big houses admired by Yeats, is, as a regicidal republican, an obvious target for the poet, and he permits himself the voice of an Irish peasant bard to bemoan the fall of an ancient Irish aristocracy to Cromwellian mammon, what he calls in the second stanza "money's rant":

You ask what I have found and far and wide I go,  
Nothing but Cromwell's house and Cromwell's murderous  
crew,  
The lovers and the dancers are beaten into the clay,  
And the tall men and the swordsmen and the horsemen  
where are they?

Eventually the poem becomes a kind of trial run for *Purgatory*, haunted by the sounds and revelry of a lost age, and ultimately seeing the speaker standing among the ruins of a country house:

I came on a great house in the middle of the night  
Its open lighted doorway and its windows all alight,  
And all my friends were there and made me welcome too;  
But I woke in an old ruin that the winds howled through<sup>20</sup>

The parallels with *Purgatory* are unmistakeable, though we are invited as readers to think of the house of that play as part of Yeats's myth of the eighteenth-century ascendancy rather than as a site of Cromwellian plunder:

Great people lived and died in this house;  
Magistrates, colonels, members of Parliament,  
Captains and Governors, and long ago

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<sup>20</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'The Curse of Cromwell', *The Poems*, 351, 352.



Men that had fought at Aughrim and the Boyne.<sup>21</sup>

Yeats hedges his bets by not telling us on which side these men fought, but that is hardly surprising given that he himself was unsure about the allegiances of his forebears in the Williamite War.<sup>22</sup>

The point is that McGahern, always conscious of Yeats's presence and always keen to learn from the master, shares many of the poet's proclivities, and this interest in the rise and fall of an aristocratic class is just one more example of that tendency. 'Oldfashioned', in its description of social misunderstandings between the Catholic poor and the Protestant ascendancy, is essentially the same story as the much earlier 'Christmas' where a boy from an industrial school, farmed out as cheap labour to the tyrannical Moran, is befriended by Mrs Grey, the owner of a local big house who is clearly modelled on Lady Gregory, her son having been killed in aerial combat over Italy. In giving the boy a toy aeroplane rather than money for Christmas she enrages his brutish master and betrays a complete lack of social guile borne of the gap in caste. Colonel Sinclair makes the same mistake in imagining he is being generous in trying to attain a place at Sandhurst for the son of the local garda sergeant. In all these cases McGahern shares Yeats's interest in, and admiration for, a sort of falling and fallen aristocracy, the last vestiges of a colonial class unable to mingle with those their

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<sup>21</sup> Yeats, *Purgatory*, 221.

<sup>22</sup> On this Yeatsian uncertainty, see A. Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 119.

ancestors conquered without at best committing a faux pas and at worst fomenting tragedy. Guard Casey of 'Oldfashioned' understands how caste works in a way that Mrs Grey and Colonel Sinclair never can. "You don't ever find robins feeding with the sparrows", he reminds the sergeant's son after the embarrassment of the Sandhurst suggestion and the inevitable ending of the friendship with the Sinclairs. Thus McGahern repeats, in rather more gentle fashion than Yeats, the warning issued in *Purgatory*, that play in which, McGahern remarks, is exposed the "Barbarism of the boy, of the new Ireland, against the high morality Yeats associated with poetry".<sup>23</sup> Though McGahern is no eugenicist, one frequently senses a similar dismay in his work at the materialist, time serving, unimaginative 'new Ireland'.

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<sup>23</sup> McGahern papers, P71/1286. Handwritten notes for a piece on *Purgatory*, 4 pp (n. d.).

## X

### **The Consolations of Nothingness: William Blake, W. B. Yeats and Prayer**

*Paul Ruttledge*: We must destroy the World; we must destroy everything that has Law and Number, for where there is nothing, there is God.<sup>1</sup>

– W. B. Yeats, *Where There is Nothing*

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<sup>1</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Where There is Nothing*, in Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Plays*, ed. Russell K. Alspach, assisted by Catharine C. Alspach (London: Macmillan, 1966), 1140.

Denis Donoghue was not the first commentator, nor will he be the last, to notice that “*That They May Face the Rising Sun* is hardly a novel at all.” “There is no story,” he explains, “no plot, but a series of vignettes. [...] Nothing happens except talk, bits of news, gossip, reminiscence.”<sup>2</sup> It is the closest that any of McGahern’s published fiction comes to fulfilling a fantasy of his literary hero Gustave Flaubert who dreamed of writing such a book:

what I would like to create is a book about nothing, a book without external attachments held aloft by the internal force of its style, as the earth stays aloft on its own, a book that would have almost no subject or at least in which the subject would, if possible, evaporate. The most beautiful works are those that have the least matter; the closer expression hugs thought, the more words cleave to it and disappear, the more beautiful it is. Therein lies the future of Art.<sup>3</sup>

While Flaubert never quite realized his dream, McGahern comes very close, in this late masterpiece, to writing the ideal book with nothing at its core.

“The life where nothing happens”, confessed McGahern in a television documentary made late in his life, “is to me the most precious life”. For McGahern, a life of “no excitements” was his stated aim and ambition, as it is for the central characters of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, Joe and Kate Ruttledge.<sup>4</sup> Seeking a peaceful, bucolic life, they have both left successful careers in London, returning to

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<sup>2</sup> Denis Donoghue, ‘John McGahern’, in *Irish Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 233.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Flaubert to Louise Colet (16 January 1852). Quoted in Frederick Brown, *Flaubert: A Biography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 289.

<sup>4</sup> McGahern speaks about his desire for such a “nice boring life” in the late documentary, *A Private World*, dir. Pat Collins (Hummingbird Productions, 2004).

the somnolent part of rural Ireland from which Joe Rutledge originates to exist as quietly and as slowly as the passing seasons. For Samuel Beckett's Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, a life where "nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes" is "awful", but for Joe Rutledge, such an existence is like a version of paradise.<sup>5</sup> As far back as his first published novel *The Barracks* almost forty years earlier McGahern had insisted on the prayer-like nature of his fiction, and wondered if what he was doing was something closer to working on religious tracts than to composing novels. Writing to the trustees of the Macaulay Fellowship while still working on what was to become *The Barracks*, he attempts to describe the aims and motivations of the book: "As it is not a novel, but an attempt to break that form down into a religious poem, I can only hope to indicate some of its tones as it moves to its end. The vision is all that matters in it, and the style, for a banality in it can assume as much importance as the beautiful."<sup>6</sup> In that belief that style alone can keep the work afloat, there is an echo of Flaubert, but also one hears Tolstoy in McGahern's insistence that true art must have a religious hue.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (1956; London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 34.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Denis Sampson, 'The solitary hero', in John Kenny (ed.), *The John McGahern Yearbook*, 3 (Galway: National University of Ireland, 2010), 75-6.

<sup>7</sup> See Tolstoy's double essay *What is Art? What is Religion?* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), *passim*.

We see that religious turn again and again throughout McGahern's writing life. In one of his earliest published interviews he stressed the centrality of religion, describing his work as "a religious activity which is keeping faith to the sources of one's own being and it is, in the pure sense of the words, a form of praise and of prayer."<sup>8</sup> His short essay, 'The Image', the closest he gets to writing an artistic manifesto, declares that "It is here, in this search for the one image, that the long and complicated journey of art betrays the simple religious nature of its activity".<sup>9</sup> *The Barracks* describes prayer as "the highest form of all human celebration".<sup>10</sup> And, writing to the Ulster novelist and short story writer Michael McLaverty after the banning of his next novel, *The Dark*, McGahern admitted to being perplexed by the attitude of the censors because "the book's a religious work if it's anything at all".<sup>11</sup> Nor does that insistently religious bent of the 1960s' McGahern dissipate or disappear in the later work. The title of his most celebrated novel, *Amongst Women*, is taken from the 'Hail Mary', and that of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is, in itself, a prayer, drawn from a tradition among the locals that bodies ought to be buried with their heads in the west, so that, explains Patrick Ryan to Joe Ruttledge, "'when he wakes he may face

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Andrew Hamilton (1966), quoted in James Whyte, *History, Myth and Ritual in the fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 126.

<sup>9</sup> John McGahern, 'The Image', *Love of the World: Essays*, ed. Stanley van der Ziel, int. Declan Kiberd (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 7.

<sup>10</sup> John McGahern, *The Barracks* (1963; London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 183.

<sup>11</sup> John McGahern to Michael McLaverty (8 August 1965), in *Dear Mr McLaverty: The Literary Correspondence of John McGahern and Michael McLaverty 1959-1980*, ed. John Killen (Belfast: Linen Hall Library, 2006), 42.

the rising sun.' Looking from face to face and drawing himself to his full height, Patrick Ryan stretched his arm dramatically towards the east. 'We look to the resurrection of the dead.'" We have here a fairly typical McGahern moment when it comes to religious ritual where a thin topsoil of Catholicism has been laid over the deeper loam of, first, the ruined monastic cemetery of Shruhaun, and second, a druidic, sun worshipping past.

But it is not just in its title that McGahern's final novel is infused with the language and philosophy of prayer and religious observance. Heaven, Hell and Paradise are mentioned so frequently, both separately and alongside each other, that it can start to feel like carelessness on the writer's part. Patrick Ryan scolds his old friend Johnny who left the area for England many years earlier: "You made the mistake of your life when you left here. You were in paradise and didn't know it." Joe Rutledge's uncle, a local small time businessman nicknamed the Shah, advises Rutledge that, since his neighbour Patrick Ryan will not complete building the shed he has started next to the house, Rutledge ought to "run him to hell". On the next page Ryan appears after a long absence and Rutledge spots him in the far distance: "'Talk of the devil,' Rutledge breathed as soon as he recognized the figure in the dark suit". On the night of Johnny's death, Ryan cannot be found to lay out the body as he normally would and the duty falls to Rutledge and a local hairdresser. When Ryan does eventually show up at the wake house he is described in ghostly terms: "Morning was beginning to thin the moonlight on the street when Patrick Ryan appeared in the

doorway without warning, and stood there, a silent dark-suited apparition". When the Ruttledges eventually leave the wake and have time to reflect, Joe describes Ryan's wraith-like arrival: "Sergeant Death appeared and found he had arrived too late".

Patrick Ryan is at the centre of a great deal of this lexicon of life and death, good and evil. Take, for instance, a six-page passage revolving around another rare visit from Ryan to the Ruttledges in order to work on finishing the construction of a shed, only to be interrupted by another visit from the Shah. Over the course of these pages Patrick is given a boiled egg to eat by Kate and declares "I'm in heaven here"; a few lines later Ryan declares that "If people were as busy and organized as the bees we'd have paradise on earth", and suggests that they proceed with the work "in the name of God". One page later the Shah says that had he known that a delivery lorry which had mistakenly come to his workplace had been carrying wine for Ruttledge he would have "run them to hell", and on the following page he suggests that Ryan ought also be run to the same infernal destination. This is again repeated on the next page before the Shah leaves and the final exchange between him and Ryan is described in ecclesiastical terms:

As he turned the heavy trailer in the space between the house and the bare iron posts, he raised a slow hand in a version of an Episcopal blessing to a grinning Patrick Ryan, who was all mock attention beneath the posts. Patrick answered with a blasphemous sign of the cross – on forehead, on both shoulders, on breast, in mock gratitude, and then raised his own hand in a smart military salute as the car and trailer swung around.



McGahern hides all of this language and gesturing as banter or as common Irish colloquialism, but as one reads and rereads the patterns are too insistent to ignore.

Towards the end of the novel, after the death of Johnny, Jamesie's brother and Ruttledge's great friend, Jamesie asks Ruttledge if he believes in an afterlife, to which the atheist Ruttledge replies that he does not:

'I don't know from what source life comes, other than out of nature, or for what purpose. I suppose it's not unreasonable to think that we go back into whatever meaning we came from. Why do you ask?'

'I've been thinking about it a lot since Johnny went.'

'What do you think?'

'I think if there's a hell and heaven that one or other or both of the places are going to be vastly overcrowded,' he said with surprising heaviness. Even his walk and tone had changed.

'I suspect hell and heaven and purgatory – even eternity – all come from our experience of life and may have nothing to do with anything else once we cross to the other side,' Ruttledge said briskly, anxious to hide his affectionate amusement at Jamesie's display of weight and gravity – he who was so important because of his wondrous lightness.

Shortly after this theological disquisition comes the final exchange of the novel in which the Ruttledges' still unfinished shed is raised to the status of a place of worship by its primary architect and builder Patrick Ryan:

'We're going to finish that building. [...] We'll head for the town and get everything we need. It takes a hard jolt now and then to learn us that we'll not be in it for ever. Tomorrow we'll make a start, in the name of the Lord, and we'll not quit until that whole cathedral of a shed is finished,' he said in the same ringing, confident tone that had ordered Johnny's head to lie to the west in Shruhaun so that when he rose with all the faithful he would face the rising sun.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002; London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 297, 79, 44, 45, 291, 294, 60-61, 62, 65, 310, 313-14.

These are just a few examples from among many – it is more than a coincidence, for instance, that McGahern uses the Tony Bennett song ‘Stranger in Paradise’ to defuse a potentially violent encounter between two bellicose lorry drivers in the lengthy mart scene half way through the novel.<sup>13</sup> But it all builds towards an intense rumination on the parallel existences of heaven and hell.

In addition to the language of a possible afterlife, whether Edenic or infernal, McGahern likes to juxtapose passages of darkness and cruelty alongside some of his most beautifully crafted pastoral descriptions. Shruhaun and environs, the neighbourhood of the Ruttledges, while for the most part a place of calm reflection and rural beauty, is also replete with sadness and loneliness. The character who has been hurt most deeply by the secrets and lies of Shruhaun society is Bill Evans, a product of Ireland’s industrial schools and a survivor of years of abuse. Should we be tempted to get too drawn into the restful lives round the lake, Jamesie, the neighbourhood’s chronicler, soon puts us right with a description of Bill Evans’s life with his employers on a nearby farm:

One day I was watching them turning sods. There were two men in the field with Jackie that I won’t name. I was watching through the hedge. Bill’s job was to trample the sods into place with the big wellingtons. Every time they’d pass close with the plough to where he was stepping the sods they’d knock him with a kick or a shove into the furrow and kill themselves laughing. It was their idea of sport.

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Stranger in Paradise’ was a British Number 1 for Tony Bennett in 1955. Sheet music for this song by Robert Wright and George Forrest is among McGahern’s papers in Galway. See P71/287.

But the gloom created by this tale is almost immediately lifted by one of the most beautiful and sparkling passages in the whole novel as Ruttledge and Jamesie take their ease around the lake:

They walked together between the steep banks of the lane. The banks were in the full glory of the summer, covered with foxgloves and small wild strawberries and green vetches. The air was scented with wild woodbine. Before they saw Bill Evans they saw the slow puffs of cigarette smoke behind a screen of young alders. He was seated on an upturned bucket at the water's edge, the other bucket by his side, drawing in the cigarette smoke as if it were the breath of life, releasing it to the still air in miserly ecstasy. Around him was the sharp scent of the burnished mint. Close by, two swans fished in the shallows, three dark cygnets by their side. Farther out, a whole stretch of water was alive and rippling with a moving shoal of perch. Elsewhere, except when it was ruffled by sudden summer gusts, the water was like glass.<sup>14</sup>

Bill Evans has found his own version of paradise, and it exists not a mile from the cruel hell of the leafield and a past of unceasing loneliness.

Once you notice this pattern of hell juxtaposed with heaven, the existence of the cruel, manipulative and sexually driven John Quinn becomes slightly more explicable. The public rape of his wife, Margaret Sweeney, on their wedding day on a lakeside rock in full view of the people of the parish is the most troubling scene in all of McGahern, and arguably – simply because it is so sudden, so unexpected and so quietly tolerated – in all of Irish fiction. Those reviewers who praised the novel for its beautifully observed pastoralism, its soft valedictory timbre and its hushed seasonal rhythms chose to ignore this act of wanton and extreme violence which leads directly

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<sup>14</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 14, 15.

to the rapid decline and fall of the entire Sweeney family who had lived happily on a small farm so perfect in its fertility and order that it was known as “the beehive”.<sup>15</sup> Prior to the arrival of John Quinn, Jamesie tells the Rutledges, the Sweeney farm “had been a little paradise”.<sup>16</sup> The rape scene is not just troubling, however, because of its moral ugliness. It is difficult to come to terms with because it seems to break one of McGahern’s golden rules of writing: “Among its many other obligations, fiction always has to be believable”.<sup>17</sup> Why, then, is it there?

In part it is to jolt us away from any easy identification of the book as a pastoral. McGahern tears the veil on a number of occasions, sometimes literally subverting the genre (pastoral meaning, relating to shepherds) by having us witness the death of a sheep or lamb:

The sun was now high above the lake. There wasn’t a wisp of cloud. Everywhere the water sparkled. A child could easily believe that the whole of heaven was dancing.

The cows calved safely and were out on grass with their calves. A single late ewe that could not open was lost with her lamb. They had taken the lamb from her, broken and dead, and she died of shock before morning.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 27. For a leading example of such a review, see Eileen Battersby, ‘A superb, earthy pastoral’, *The Irish Times* (8 December 2001).

<sup>16</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 32.

<sup>17</sup> John McGahern, ‘Preface’, *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), vii.

<sup>18</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 261.

'Heaven' again is insistently there, but then paradise is quickly destroyed. One temptation in searching for McGahern's point of reference in all of this is to look towards another writer keen to place good and evil, Heaven and Hell, alongside each other, and that is William Blake. Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) consists of a gnomic series of aphorisms accompanied by his mystical drawings that point, as the title suggests, to the need for opposites and contraries to exist side by side in order for progress to occur. "Without contraries", Blake writes in Plate 3, "there is no progression".<sup>19</sup> McGahern was fascinated by this idea, in particular as it applies to his favourite W. B. Yeats play, *Purgatory*, of which every line, writes McGahern "is filled with the drama of opposites".<sup>20</sup> One thinks in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* of the happy existence alongside one another of the saintly Jamesie and Mary with the demonic John Quinn. And the closing words of Blake's short tract encapsulate the overall thrust of McGahern's final novel, overflowing as it is with the most wonderful and moving passages about nature and the changing seasons: "For every thing that lives is Holy."<sup>21</sup> We are all, as is the title of McGahern's late story, creatures of the earth.

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<sup>19</sup> William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, int. and commentary Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), plate 3.

<sup>20</sup> See John McGahern, 'Introduction', in John Butler Yeats, *Letters to his Son W. B. Yeats and Others, 1869-1922*, ed. Joseph Hone; abridged and int. McGahern (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 20.

<sup>21</sup> Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 27.

But it is not to Blake directly that I think McGahern is referring us, but, yet again, to that great mystic's most important literary disciple, W. B. Yeats. A great deal of Yeats's philosophy, including his belief in the need for contraries and opposites – the self and anti-self – to exist in order for the world to function properly and the soul to prosper, comes directly from Blake, and though Blake's *Marriage* is in part a subversion of another of Yeats's mystical influences, Emmanuel Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell* (1758), he remains intensely in Blake's sway.<sup>22</sup> Through the late 1880s and early 1890s, in partnership with his friend Edwin Ellis, he put enormous time and energy into producing a plenary edition of Blake's work.<sup>23</sup> He even found it necessary to convince himself, erroneously, that Blake was of Irish heritage, descending from a rather vague eighteenth-century Dubliner named John O'Neil who took up with a Rathmines shebeen owner named Ellen Blake.<sup>24</sup> Yeats saw in Blake the beginning of the romantic movement and the wellspring of a profound, universal truth:

He is one of those great artificers of God who uttered mysterious truths to a little clan. The others spoke to theologians and magicians, and he speaks to poets and artists. The others drew their symbols from theology and alchemy, and he from

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<sup>22</sup> Despite the title *Heaven and Hell* and the importance of Swedenborg to Yeats, I can make no argument for Swedenborg's detailed description of the afterlife, heaven and its angels as an influence on McGahern. See Emmanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell; also, The Intermediate State, or World of Spirits; a relation of things heard and seen* (London: The Swedenborg Society, 1896), *passim*.

<sup>23</sup> See William Blake, *The Works; Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical*, 3 vols., ed. with Lithographs of the illustrated 'Prophetic Books', and a memoir and interpretation by Edwin John Ellis and William Butler Yeats (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1893). On the background and execution of this project, see R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life I: The Apprentice Mage 1865-1914* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 98-101.

<sup>24</sup> See W. B. Yeats, 'Introduction', in William Blake, *Poetical Works* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1910), xi.

the flowers of spring and the leaves of summer; but the message is the same, and the truth uttered is the truth God spake to the red clay at the beginning of the world.<sup>25</sup>

Blake's visionary power is, then, drawn from nature rather than from supernature, and Yeats, always striving to look behind the trembling veil of life, found this encouraging. Blake's fingerprints are all over Yeats's work, from the very title of his early, important collection of essays, *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1903), in which he declares Blake "the chanticler of the new dawn", to the clapping soul of 'Sailing to Byzantium' as it escapes the strictures of the mortal and decaying body.<sup>26</sup> It was a lifelong attraction, as a letter to Ethel Mannin of 1936 shows:

As a young man I used to repeat to myself Blake's lines  
'And he his seventy disciples sent  
Against religion and government'  
I hate more than you do, for my hatred can have no expression in action.<sup>27</sup>

For the purposes of a McGahern influence or awareness, it is to a much younger Yeats I would wish to turn, to the early, and later discarded, play *Where There is Nothing* (1902).

In his thinking on Yeats as dramatist, it is clear from his notes on *Purgatory* that McGahern is influenced by Peter Ure, author of *Yeats the Playwright* (1963), and a

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxi-xxxii.

<sup>26</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Symbolism in Painting', in *Essays and Introductions*, 150.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Hazard Adams, *Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1955), 11. This book is still the best study of Blake's impact on Yeats.

Professor and one time head of the English department at Newcastle University where McGahern was a visiting fellow in the mid-seventies.<sup>28</sup> “Yeats’s plays”, begins that study, “have not, generally speaking, been much regarded by his modern critics. They have tended to judge the earlier ones (1889-1906) as flaccid and sentimental, and the later ones (1915-38) as barbarous, remote, theatrically impractical, or merely puzzling.” Like McGahern, Ure considers *Purgatory* Yeats’s finest dramatic achievement: “It is perhaps his greatest play, and certainly his most profoundly human treatment of this subject.”<sup>29</sup> And in his unpublished thoughts on *Purgatory* McGahern quotes directly from Ure: “Professor Ure: Yeats has at last found a use for God”.<sup>30</sup>

Among the early plays that Ure quite rightly describes as having been rejected as ‘flaccid and sentimental’ is the little read, and even less staged, *Where There is Nothing*. This work is a long, five-act play that follows the fortunes of a visionary, Paul Rutledge, described in the cast of characters as a ‘Country Gentleman’, who abandons his life of big-house comfort in order to pursue truth and freedom, first by joining a tinker camp, then later by spending five years in a monastery, and finally by leading a life as a heretic preacher – this final choice for which he is killed in the closing scene.

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<sup>28</sup> Peter Ure was no longer at the department when McGahern was a fellow at Newcastle, but his reputation and presence were still felt. I am grateful to Madeline McGahern for sharing this insight.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Ure, *Yeats the Playwright: A Commentary on Character and Design in the Major Plays* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 1, 84-5.

<sup>30</sup> McGahern papers, P71/1288, 7. The full quote from Ure’s study is: “Yeats – can it be said? – has at last found a use for God. He is called in because the Yeatsian dead can no longer manage by themselves, so extraordinary has their private purgatory become.” See Ure, *Yeats the Playwright*, 107.



Like the core poem of my next chapter, 'Ego Dominus Tuus', another crucial Yeats text for an understanding of McGahern's late fiction, the play is a reflection on the choice between the inner and the outer man – Paul Ruttledge favours the inner man, the spiritual, the soul over everything. That choice – contemplation over action – is mulled over again and again in Yeats and stems in part from his studies in Blake. But for all the Blakean radicalism of *Where There is Nothing*, the play quickly fell out of favour with Yeats and is not included in *The Collected Plays* of 1934. A play on a similar theme, *The Unicorn from the Stars* (1907), replaced *Where There is Nothing* in his affections for reasons he explains in a 1908 note:

Some years ago I wrote in a fortnight with the help of Lady Gregory and another friend a five act tragedy called *Where There is Nothing*. I wrote at such speed that I might save from a plagiarist a subject that seemed worth the keeping till greater knowledge of the stage made an adequate treatment possible.

Yeats goes on in that note to directly nod towards Blake:

Ever since I began to write I have awaited with impatience a linking, all Europe over, of the hereditary knowledge of the country-side, now becoming known to us through the work of wanderers and men of learning, with our old lyricism so full of ancient frenzies and hereditary wisdom, a yoking of antiquities, a Marriage of Heaven and Hell.<sup>31</sup>

Yeats borrowed the title of the play from a story he had first published in *The Sketch* in October 1896 called 'Where there is Nothing, there is God'. It was collected in *The*

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<sup>31</sup> Yeats, in *Variorum Plays*, 712, 712-13.

*Secret Rose* (1897) and he revised it several times, the final version appearing in *Mythologies* in 1932. In the story a bearded beggar comes calling on a snowy night to a monastery. It becomes apparent after the strange transformation of a young scholar, Olioll, from a dullard to a bright spark, that the change is due to the intercession of the beggar, and that he is none other than Aengus, a holy man with magical powers over birds and wild animals. He is, declares the abbot, "Aengus the Lover of God, and the first of those who have gone to live in the wild places and among the wild beasts. [...] Let us go to him and bow down before him; for at last, after long seeking, he has found the nothing that is God".<sup>32</sup> Finding out that nothingness, the still and quiet life, is sacred, is at the heart of McGahern's late thinking as it shows itself in his last novel.

The plagiarist from whom Yeats claimed he was trying to protect his ideas was George Moore, who felt that he was the one being plagiarized and who subsequently used the name Paul Rutledge to publish an article in the little magazine *Dana* (1904-05) to undermine Yeats and his theatre.<sup>33</sup> Almost a century later, John McGahern again borrows the name for the central character of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*.<sup>34</sup> Rutledge is not a common Irish surname. MacLysaght records the name 'Rutledge'

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<sup>32</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Secret Rose, Stories: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Phillip L. Marcus, Warwick Gould and Michael J. Sidnell (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981), 53-54.

<sup>33</sup> See Paul Rutledge [George Moore], 'Stage Management in the Irish National Theatre', *Dana: An Irish Magazine of Independent Thought*, vol. I, May 1904-April 1905 (New York: Lemma Publishing, 1970), 150-52.

<sup>34</sup> In early drafts of what was originally called 'That He May Face the Rising Sun', McGahern's lead character and narrator was not named Joe Rutledge but, rather improbably, Walter Domino. See McGahern papers, P71/187 and P71/188.

in his *Guide to Irish Surnames* as “An English name strangely used as a synonym of Mulderrig”.<sup>35</sup> The only two prominent Ruttledges in Irish history were both Mayo men, one, Robin (1899-2002), a Major in the British army in India and for many years Ireland’s foremost ornithologist, the other, P. J. (1892-1952), a noted Ballina guerrilla fighter and later Minister in various Fianna Fáil governments of the 1930s and ‘40s.<sup>36</sup> Each might bear relevance to *That They May Face the Rising Sun* which has interesting sidelines on both bird life and republican insurgency, but, given McGahern’s indebtedness to Yeats’s work elsewhere, it seems likely that he is borrowing the name primarily from *Where There is Nothing*. Both Joe and Paul Ruttledge seek the same thing, both are country gentlemen of a sort, both drop out of orthodox society in pursuit of peace and a life of contemplation. When, in Act Two, the tinker Charlie Ward, with whom Paul Ruttledge has taken up, declares that what man seeks is the darkness, Ruttledge replies: “The dark. Yes, I think that is what I want. [...] The dark, where there is nothing that is anything, and nobody that is anybody; one can be free there, where there is nothing”.<sup>37</sup> And nothingness is again craved in act five when

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<sup>35</sup> Edward MacLysaght, *A Guide to Irish Surnames*, second ed., revised and enlarged (Dublin: Helicon, 1965), 181.

<sup>36</sup> See James McGuire and James Quinn (ed.), *Dictionary of Irish Biography: From the Earliest Times to the Year 2000*, vol. 8 (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 673-75.

<sup>37</sup> Ruttledge’s choice of ‘the dark’ is also particular to McGahern, primarily evident in the title of his second novel. Denis Sampson has argued, with good reason, that the title is drawn from another Yeats text, the poem ‘The Choice’. See Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 64.

Ruttledge sets out his worldview: “We have learned too much, our minds are like troubled waters – we get nothing but broken images. He who knew nothing may have seen all”.<sup>38</sup>

Written by McGahern at the same time as *That They May Face the Rising Sun* and again using the name Ruttledge for a central character is the short story ‘Love of the World’.<sup>39</sup> Like Paul Ruttledge of *Where There is Nothing*, Kate Ruttledge of ‘Love of the World’ is also fated to be murdered. She dies at the hands of Harkin, her worldly and jealous garda husband, Paul Ruttledge under the blows of a mob unwilling to listen to his philosophizing. Dying, he declares that “Death is the last adventure, the first perfect joy, for at death the soul comes into possession of itself, and returns to the joy that made it”.<sup>40</sup> In its acceptance of the inevitable, it is a not dissimilar theology to that expressed by Joe Ruttledge to Jamesie at the end of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*: “I don’t know from what source life comes, other than out of nature, or for what purpose. I suppose it’s not unreasonable to think that we go back into whatever meaning we came from”.<sup>41</sup> In ‘Love of the World’ nothingness looms large. One

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<sup>38</sup> Yeats, in *Variorum Plays*, 1090-91, 1156.

<sup>39</sup> A close examination of the McGahern papers confirms that McGahern worked on these texts simultaneously, with, for example, Jamesie featuring as a character in early drafts of ‘Love of the World’. The story was first published in *Granta: The Magazine of New Writing* (Autumn 1997), and also broadcast as part of a B.B.C. radio series ‘Spirit Of The Place’ on 25 May 1997, and collected in *Creatures of The Earth* (2006).

<sup>40</sup> Yeats, *Variorum Plays*, 1160.

<sup>41</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 310.

copybook in the McGahern collection at Galway is especially notable in this regard when the author works over and over again on what will become the opening paragraph of that story.<sup>42</sup> Though the makeup of that opening changes slightly with each telling, the first two sentences remain the same and are repeated like a litany: "It is very quiet here. Nothing much ever happens".<sup>43</sup> This initial paragraph is separated from the rest of the story by a line break as a standalone preface. And it is clear that the world where nothing happens is, for McGahern, a kind of paradise. When something does happen – in this case the coming of Guard Harkin into the community, his marriage to Kate Ruttledge and the tragic consequences this eventually brings – it is disastrous. As characters, Harkin and John Quinn are cut from the same cloth: handsome, materialistic, sexually ravenous, proud and cruel. They are, in short, demonic, possessing an otherworldly quality hinted at in an early exchange between Joe and Kate Ruttledge after a visit from Quinn who is in search of help in finding his next sexual conquest:

'I was sorry to leave,' Kate said. 'I couldn't bear to be in the same room with him. Very few people have that effect.'

'I was wondering if he was real while he was talking,' Ruttledge said.<sup>44</sup>

And as for Harkin, his supernatural and evil nature is more than just hinted at -- visiting continental tourists to whom he promises to find wives are impressed and

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<sup>42</sup> See McGahern papers, P71/651.

<sup>43</sup> John McGahern, 'Love of the World, *Creatures of the Earth*, 366.

<sup>44</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 25.

amused: "They roared with laughter. 'Harkin can do anything. Harkin is the devil...'"<sup>45</sup>

These diabolical characters bring unwanted and unasked for action and bustle where previously there was quietness and calm. In McGahern's worldview such figures inevitably intrude on the ideal life where nothing happens, and force heaven and hell to collide with terrible consequences.

Finally, on the issue of borrowed names, if 'Ruttledge' is taken from Yeats, so, too, might be the name of McGahern's last great villain, John Quinn. Excluding *Where There is Nothing* from his *Collected Plays* (1934) was a sensible decision by Yeats as it is overly long, clumsily didactic and rather rambling. Nobody thought very highly of it except for the literary revival's most important American backer, the New York lawyer John Quinn. Writing to Macmillan in February 1903 he tries to explain his position on the play. "I do not want you to think that this is mere unreasoning enthusiasm", he writes. "I feel that I am fairly well acquainted with modern literature and believe that this is as fine a play as any published these ten years and much more poetical and striking than several of Ibsen's plays".<sup>46</sup> It is likely that Quinn was trying to manoeuvre a position whereby the play became a greater revenue earner, for making money was one of his greatest talents along with collecting great art, fraternizing with famous artistic friends, and seducing women, among them Lady

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<sup>45</sup> McGahern, 'Love of the World', *Creatures of the Earth*, 347.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Yeats, *Variorum Plays*, 1166.

Gregory.<sup>47</sup> Is Jamesie's description of John Quinn as "a bit of a lawyer as well as everything else" a coincidence?<sup>48</sup> I doubt it. McGahern writes affectionately of Quinn in his introduction to the letters of John Butler Yeats, the artist father of the more celebrated poet son.<sup>49</sup> Though John Quinn is, like his fictional namesake, a man of the world, he is not the vaguely satanic cajoler of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. And as much as he can admire Quinn for his support of Yeats *père*, it is to John Butler Yeats himself that McGahern's deepest affections turn. For JBY was as unworldly as a man can be, a dreamer, an idealist and an artist to his core, a man who saw beyond the trappings of fame and fortune with which Quinn surrounded himself, and who realized that where there is nothing, there is God.

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<sup>47</sup> John Quinn's biographer acknowledges his subject's reputation as a womanizer but finds little evidence to support it. See B. L. Reid, *The Man from New York: John Quinn and his Friends* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), x.

<sup>48</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 185.

<sup>49</sup> See McGahern, 'Introduction', in John Butler Yeats, *Letters*, 1-24.

# Deliberate Happiness: W. B. Yeats and the Inner Life

*Hic.*                                 And yet  
No one denies to Keats love of the world;  
Remember his deliberate happiness.

– W. B. Yeats, 'Ego Dominus Tuus'

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After John McGahern's death in 2006 it inevitably became more difficult to say with certainty how and why he made certain artistic decisions. I am thinking particularly of his choice of titles. Of his late story 'Love of the World' – also the title chosen by the editor for McGahern's posthumously published essays – Stanley van der Ziel has argued that it is drawn from Hannah Arendt.<sup>2</sup> He also guides us to *Memoir* where the phrase is used by McGahern in one of his many reveries about the beauty and mystery of human existence: "We grow into a love of the world, a love that is all the more precious and poignant because the great glory of which we are but a particle is lost almost as soon as it is gathered".<sup>3</sup> While McGahern's admiration for Arendt is undoubted, I would like to argue here that the title 'Love of the World' is drawn not primarily from Arendt but from one of the central poems of the Yeatsian oeuvre, 'Ego Dominus Tuus'. There are compelling reasons for such a reading, and the choice made by McGahern to allude to this poem is important, permitting us to speculate on several of his artistic and philosophic preoccupations, most notably the rectitude of exalting the inner man over the outer, prioritizing the life of contemplation over action.

Before looking at 'Love of the World', let us examine an otherwise seemingly innocuous moment from *That They May Face the Rising Sun* in which McGahern chooses to lean on Yeats. We return to one of McGahern's favourite scenes: the saving

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<sup>2</sup> See Stanley Van der Ziel, 'Editor's Preface', in John McGahern, *Love of the World: Essays*, ed. Stanley van der Ziel, int. Declan Kiberd (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), xli, where van der Ziel points to Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's study *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (1984) as evidence.

<sup>3</sup> John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 36.

of the hay. Here Mary, Jamesie's wife and the Ruttledge's dear neighbour, is recounting the last days of Jamesie's father around the time of the annual haymaking:

'In weather like this but a little later Jamesie's father died,' Mary said quietly. 'They were building the hayrick in the yard where the hayshed is now. The father was sick in bed but couldn't stay away from the window. "They are putting it up wrong," he'd cry out in rage. Why worry yourself about them? It'll be their lookout, I'd say, and try to coax him away from the window. But he'd not be five minutes back in bed in the lower room when he'd be back with his nose pressed to the glass like a bold child.'

'Were they putting up the rick wrong?'

'Not at all. They were putting it up different to the way he put it up. The string of curses was terrible: it'd fall, let in rain, rot, there wouldn't be a mouthful for the cows. I'd coax him back to bed again but in no time he'd be back at the window with his nose pressed to the glass.'

Later this insistent image of the nose pressed to the glass returns as Ruttledge helps Jamesie and Mary win their own hay:

When Ruttledge suggested that she had more than enough done for the day and he and Jamesie would be able to finish on their own, she would not hear of giving up.

'What is it but another small while? I wonder what the poor old father would make out of the shed now if he ran and put his nose to the window?' she laughed.

'He'd go out of his mind,' Jamesie said. 'He'd think the world had gone mad.'

'We may all be the father at the window yet,' Ruttledge said.

'And that's life!' Jamesie shouted down from the stifling heat of the hayshed.<sup>4</sup>

As we have seen on other occasions throughout this study, from a less accomplished artist you might just put this repetition down to bad or careless writing, but, as with Joyce, when McGahern repeats or uses an oddity of phrase it is always worth your

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<sup>4</sup> John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002; London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 120, 129.

while digging a little further. In this case, as with the haymaking on the mountain farm in *The Leavetaking*, Yeats is being touched and conversed with – but now the poem has changed from 'Among School Children' to the dialogue between Hic and Ille that is 'Ego Dominus Tuus':

*Hic.* And yet  
No one denies to Keats love of the world;  
Remember his deliberate happiness.

*Ille.* His art is happy, but who knows his mind?  
I see a schoolboy when I think of him,  
With face and nose pressed to a sweet-shop window,  
For certainly he sank into his grave  
His senses and his heart unsatisfied

The poem was composed by Yeats in 1915 and appeared in the 1919 collection *The Wild Swans at Coole*. The title, meaning 'I am your Lord', is drawn from Dante's *La Vita Nuova* as Yeats explains in a 1917 essay much admired by McGahern, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*:

That which comes as complete, as minutely organised, as are those elaborate, brightly lighted buildings and sceneries appearing in a moment, as I lie between sleep and waking, must come from above me and beyond me. At times I remember that place in Dante where he sees in his chamber the 'Lord of Terrible Aspect', and how, seeming 'to rejoice inwardly that it was a marvel to see, speaking, he said many things among the which I could understand but few, and of these this: ego dominus tuus'.<sup>5</sup>

The poem is an important early iteration of Yeats's doctrine of the anti-self and the need to adopt a mask to more truly reveal one's self, with Hic (meaning 'this one') and

<sup>5</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae', in *Mythologies* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 325-26.

Ille (meaning 'that one') representing two different aspects of the Yeatsian worldview, Ille being the dominant voice.

I do not wish to suggest that McGahern equates Jamesie's dying father with John Keats. He is not literally picking up 'Ego Dominus Tuus' as a template or stencil and laying it down on top of his novel. But he is, once more, using Yeats as a touchstone on which to sharpen his own sense of the world. The primary interest of 'Ego Dominus Tuus' for McGahern is the debate it opens up about whether one is better living a life of material ambition, pursuit of outward success and subsequent recognition by one's fellows or a life of the mind, of withdrawal from the world and inward contemplation. Hic represents the former position and argues that the correct course of action is for men to be "lovers of life" and to "look for happiness/And sing when they have found it". Ille disagrees, and while seeing that there appears to be an outward patina of victory for such men -- they "grow rich, popular and full of influence" -- their striving for success is, ultimately, futile: the "struggle of the fly in marmalade". The same debate is at the heart of McGahern's fiction throughout his career, but it comes to a noticeable peak in the late years of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* and 'Love of the World'. In early drafts of what was to become that last great novel McGahern even considered paying open homage to Yeats's poem and

concomitantly Dante's *La Vita Nuova* by calling his central character the rather unlikely 'Walter Domino'.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the best example of the debate between pursuit of the material or the spiritual good in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is in the differing paths chosen, on the one hand, by the charming and satisfied Jamesie and Mary Murphy and that followed, on the other, by their only child, Jim, a successful and high ranking civil servant who has married a social climbing narcissist:

To Ruttledge, Jim was a quiet, courteous man without the vividness or presence or the warmth of his parents. He had the habit of attention and his face was kind. It was as if he had been prematurely exhausted by the long journey he had made and discovered little sustenance on the new shores of Kildare Street and Mount Merrion. Already he had gone far but was unlikely to advance much further without luck. The people who could promote him to the highest rung would have to be interacted with and could not be studied like a problem or a book.

His wife would want his advancement and certainly she herself would be a hindrance to what she sought. When she first met the Ruttledges she expected them to be bowled over by her personality since they were already friendly with her parents-in-law. They found her exhausting. She drew all her life from what was outside herself, especially from the impression she imagined she was making on other people, and her dark good looks and sexual attractiveness helped this primal conceit.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See McGahern papers, P71/187. Handwritten draft of part of 'That He May Face The Rising Sun' beginning 'Jim Ryan and Walter Domino stood looking up at the completed frame of the new shed.' Paginated 1-58 (n. d.), 1.

<sup>7</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 132.

In early drafts McGahern allowed himself to be even harsher and clearer on the folly of material ambition, of love of the world:

They were both overweight and too fleshy for their age. [...] Jim was now a more attractive man than his wife was as a woman. He was watchful. He was attentive and careful with his parents and children but he had no real charm or confidence. It was as if he had left the old spontaneous warmth of the house at an early age and found no other world, and increasingly the world of study and work and success became a colder and colder place, and he had lost forever the first warm world.<sup>8</sup>

Jim, and even more so his wife, are signal instances of Yeats's marmalade-smeared flies, gorging themselves on the sweet jam but failing to realize that they are trapped by their own worldliness. Outwardly they appear to have rich, fulfilling lives of foreign holidays, big cars and all the accoutrements of the bourgeois dream. But Rutledge -- who is the Ille of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* -- can see that the apparent success is empty, that Jim is exhausted by his own and his wife's ambition, that they lack the grace, courtesy and inner calm that is the hallmark of Jim's parents. The greatest error made by Jim's wife is her total engagement with the trappings and baubles of the exterior world: she 'drew all her life from what was outside herself'. Egotistical pride in one's worldly achievements is, for McGahern, one of the cardinal

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<sup>8</sup> McGahern papers, P71/226. Handwritten fragments of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 45 pp (n. d.), [17].

sins. If we understand 'the world' as that outer, visible place where we run the race and compete for the glittering prizes, then too much 'love of the world' is a bad thing.

The Ruttledges have opted to leave that world and their busy London lives, and to opt for the quiet, unremarked life of rural hush and calm. As a result of this decision, Joe Ruttledge is as close to happiness as anyone in all of McGahern. Up to this point, the central characters in all of his novels have been deeply unsettled, even tormented people: Elizabeth Reegan, young Mahoney, Patrick Moran of *The Leavetaking*, Michael, the restless pornographer of his fourth novel and Moran of Great Meadow. But in this final, valedictory novel it is as if McGahern has approached something like a solution and decided to share it with his readers. But to name or acknowledge happiness remains dangerous. When Jamesie thinks of how his neighbour Bill Evans might cope with leaving the farm on which he has worked as practically a slave through much of his adult life, and moving into sheltered accommodation in the town, the whole concept of happiness is called into question:

'He'll have great times in the town. He'll devour everything in sight. He'll eat and drink rings round him. He'll fatten,' Jamesie said in glee. 'Sometimes I think he's as happy as anybody.'

The words hung in the air a moment without meeting agreement or disagreement: it was as if they both knew secretly that there was no certainty as to what constituted the happiness or unhappiness of another.

This suspicion is clarified in one of the passages of the novel most often quoted and publicly read by McGahern after its publication. Ruttledge has come home from Jamesie's after going through the annual September ritual of watching the All-Ireland

final together on television, and as he arrives in the house he hears Kate chatting with the Shah:

As he listened to the two voices he was so attached to and thought back to the afternoon, the striking of the two clocks, the easy, pleasant company, the walk round the shore, with a rush of feeling he felt that this must be happiness. As soon as the thought came to him, he fought it back, blaming the whiskey. The very idea was as dangerous as presumptive speech: happiness could not be sought or worried into being, or even fully grasped; it should be allowed its own slow pace so that it passes unnoticed, if it ever comes at all.

And again, three months later, there is an unnamed sense of deep satisfaction or even joy in the Rutledge house as visitors are welcomed and the courtesies of a country Christmas are observed: "The days were quiet. They did not feel particularly quiet or happy but through them ran the sense, like an underground river, that there would come a time when these days would be looked back on as happiness, all that life could give of contentment and peace".<sup>9</sup>

One is prompted here to think of Yeats's river in 'Coole and Ballylee, 1931' that he imagines drops underground at his tower and reemerges in the Gregory demesne. That tower, the adjacent river and sands, is the setting also for 'Ego Dominus Tuus', a poem, in its warnings about willed happiness, that is again on McGahern's mind here, as Hic tries to defend pursuit of worldly success as a way of living:

And yet  
No one denies to Keats love of the world;

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<sup>9</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 135-36, 192, 218.



Remember his deliberate happiness.

Ille remains unmoved, thinks of Keats as the boy with his nose pressed to "a sweet-shop window", and knows that "he sank into his grave/His senses and his heart unsatisfied". Yeats's sense of happiness is of an emotion that cannot be summoned up or made to comply with human wishes. "At certain moments, always unforeseen," he writes in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, "I become happy".<sup>10</sup>

There is still one yet clearer consideration of the possibility of happiness in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, and it comes in a dialogue between Ruttledge and Patrick Ryan. It is Christmas Day and Ruttledge has called to Ryan's ramshackle house – a place so unkept and lifeless that Ryan refers to it as 'the tomb'. While Ryan eats a bizarre meal of bread and apples washed down with a mixture of milk and whiskey, he suddenly sounds a rare philosophical note:

'Are you happy, lad?' he demanded.

Ruttledge had added turf briquettes to the fire and was looking silently into the flames.

'I'm not unhappy,' he answered, surprised.

'What does that mean?'

'I'm not over the moon. I have health, for the time being, enough money, no immediate worries. That, I believe, is about as good as it gets. Are *you* happy?'

'I am in fuck. There are times I don't know who I am from one minute to the next. That's why I always liked the acting. You are someone else and always know what you are doing and why.'<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Yeats, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, 364.

<sup>11</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 214.

Here we have Ryan, like Yeats in 'Ego Dominus Tuus' and in sundry other later writings, profess a doctrine of the mask. By acting – something that both Patrick Ryan and Johnny Murphy excelled at as younger men – you stand a better chance of speaking the truth, of knowing what to do, even of understanding the world and its vicissitudes. Ille in Yeats's dialogue understands this and so calls to his "own opposite" or to "the mysterious one [...] being indeed my double" in search of a deeper understanding of the world. Yeats, in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, explains what he sees as the power and significance of this anti-self:

Nor has any poet I have read of or heard of or met with been a sentimentalist. The other self, the anti-self or the antithetical self, as one may choose to name it, comes but to those who are no longer deceived, whose passion is reality. The sentimentalists are practical men who believe in money, in position, in a marriage bell, and whose understanding of happiness is to be so busy whether at work or at play that all is forgotten but the momentary aim.<sup>12</sup>

This view of the world is an interesting inversion of our standard contemporary notion that money men and entrepreneurs are hardnosed realists, and artists and scholars dreamy sentimentalists. Yeats believes the opposite to be the case, and in that pursuit of 'the marriage bell' in particular one thinks again of John Quinn and his never ending pursuit of new wives.

In giving the closing lines of 'Ego Dominus Tuus' to Ille, Yeats privileges his voice over Hic's. Keats's deliberate happiness is dismissed as is Hic's lionization of

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<sup>12</sup> Yeats, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, 331.

"Impulsive men that look for happiness". Another of such men in McGahern's late works is Guard Harkin of the last published story, 'Love of the World'. Harkin of this story and John Quinn of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* are almost identical characters. They are successful men of the world, full of pride and possessed of voracious sexual appetites. Quinn on his first wedding day, we are told by Mary, "was in a brand new grey suit with a white flower in the buttonhole. He was full of himself and he was shining". When his second marriage to a woman he meets through the Knock marriage bureau quickly fails, it becomes a subject of mirth and fascination for the community:

'Did she give no sign or warning?' Ruttledge asked.

'Oh yes. Oh -- yes, but those like John Quinn are too bound up with themselves to heed.'<sup>13</sup>

Being full of oneself is one of the great sins for McGahern. Nothing good can come of it, and in 'Love of the World' it leads to murder.

Harkin is a local hero, a former Mayo county footballer who is transferred to the district and leads the parish club to a county title for the first time in nineteen years. Kate Ruttledge, a local beauty, falls in love with this image of power and athletic mastery:

She'd seen Harkin prostrate on the field at Castlebar when Mayo lost in the Connacht Final, but everywhere else she attended was victory and triumph. She'd witnessed men and boys look long and deep into his face, lost in the circle

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<sup>13</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 28, 185.

and dream of his fame. She'd held her breath as she'd seen him ride the shoulders of running mobs bearing him in triumph from the pitches.<sup>14</sup>

When she brings Harkin to meet her parents Maggie and James on their small farm they can see that she is under the spell of young love and worry about Harkin's egotism. "I can't help wishing she had found herself somebody easier", James confides in Maggie, "That poor young man is full of himself".<sup>15</sup>

"For those that love the world", Ille tells us, "serve it in action,/Grow rich, popular and full of influence". Harkin is a lover of the world in a blind, self-centred, destructive sense. After retiring from the guards with health problems he becomes wealthy by tapping into the growing tourist market in the district and ruthlessly exploiting the local resources to line his pockets: "He organized shooting expeditions. He took them on fishing trips all over. These tourists did not return their catch to the water. The sport was in the kill. As well as pheasant, duck, woodcock, pigeon, snipe, they shot songbirds, thrushes, blackbirds, even larks". Harkin gets away with this behaviour in part because he is admired by the locals for his get up and go, but also because "of his contacts in the guards he was able to obstruct complaints". Little

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<sup>14</sup> John McGahern, 'Love of the World', *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 337.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 339. In drafts of 'Love of the World' McGahern considers greater emphasis on the trancelike state brought about when falling in love: 'Drugged with the honey of sex, they had eyes and ears only for one another'. See McGahern papers, P71/654. Typescript draft of 'Love of The World' with handwritten amendments, paginated pp 1-35 (n. d.), 2.

wonder that these European visitors think of Harkin fondly as "the devil", a mover and shaker in an otherwise sleepy place of "deserted beauty".<sup>16</sup>

All of this rapacious destruction of the natural world is quietly tolerated, "but everybody disliked the slaughter of the songbirds".<sup>17</sup> This intolerance is significant and ties in with a preoccupation of McGahern's in this story, and throughout his late work, with bird life. The story ends with the shrieking of birds and, in earlier drafts, it began with local competitiveness over who would be first each year to hear the cuckoo: "Through April there is always argument as to which of us was the first to hear the cuckoo as if that bird and April would never come again and one lucky person could be blessed forever".<sup>18</sup> After Kate's father dies she finds it hard to cope, but the birds are ever present: "Her father was gone, his dear presence nowhere but in her mind, and everything continue on as before. The blackbirds and thrushes racketed. A robin sang." And in the wake of Kate's murder the birds bring solace to her small community: "A silence came down around all that happened. Nobody complained about the normal quiet. Bird cries were sweet. The wing-beat of the swan crossing the house gave strength."<sup>19</sup> That acute observation of the natural world was present in

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<sup>16</sup> McGahern, 'Love of the World', 345, 345, 347, 345. Weariness at the deadening impact of tourism on local life goes at least as far back as 'Korea' with its description of "the tourists who came every summer from Liverpool and Birmingham in increasing numbers to sit in aluminium deck-chairs on the riverbank". See McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, 48.

<sup>17</sup> McGahern, 'Love of the World', 345.

<sup>18</sup> McGahern papers, P71/651. Handwritten draft of part of 'Love of the World', 4 pp (n. d.), 1.

<sup>19</sup> McGahern, 'Love of the World', 346, 366.

McGahern's work from the earliest days, but in late stories like 'Love of the World' and 'Creatures of the Earth', and in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* and *Memoir* it reaches new heights. To notice these birds in all their delicacy and beauty is one version of loving the world, to slaughter them is another.

To use birds as representative of natural purity and a kind of God-given perfection is a tactic of Christ's. In the Gospel of Saint Matthew, Jesus sets out the choice faced by each man between serving God or Mammon:

Jesus said to his disciples: 'No one can be the slave of two masters: he will either hate the first and love the second, or treat the first with respect and the second with scorn. You cannot be the slave both of God and of money. That is why I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat, nor about your body and how you are to clothe it. Surely life means more than food, and the body more than clothing! Look at the birds in the sky. They do not sow or reap or gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. [...] So do not worry; do not say, "What are we to eat? What are we to drink? How are we to be clothed?" It is the pagans who set their hearts on all these things.'<sup>20</sup>

Harkin's lifestyle places him firmly among the pagans, and that disquiet of the locals at his killing of the birds has biblical undertones. The Bible -- as it was for Proust, as it was for Ruskin -- is another of McGahern's sacred books, if not necessarily as a moral guide, then as a work of art and of wisdom.

The choice between God and money is not exactly the choice being weighed up by Ille and Hic, but it is close: the inner versus the outer world, spiritual calm versus

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<sup>20</sup> Gospel of Saint Matthew 6:24-34.

worldly success. Birds again come into play. If Harkin can be thought of as a version of Hic's 'impulsive men that look for happiness', then Ille has Maggie Rutledge as his representative in 'Love of the World'. Because of her intensely rich interior life, she copes well with her daughter's murder, unlike Harkin who, lacking such inner calm, commits suicide in custody. Maggie raises the three orphaned children and sends each of them to university. The story closes with the narrator bringing her to a function in Carrick where she is to be presented with an award as 'Senior Citizen of the Year'. She is nonplussed and chary of praise, conscious that the "old people used always to say it was never lucky to be too noticed". On the way home after the presentation she remains unmoved and unimpressed: "'The whole lot of them would lighten your head. What did I do? I did nothing. What else could I do? I was -- in life. [...] Even where I am now, it's still all very interesting. Sometimes even far, far too interesting.'"<sup>21</sup> In this fascination with the very mysteriousness of the world, she is exactly as Ille is described by Hic in the poem's opening lines:

you walk in the moon,  
And, though you have passed the best of life, still trace,  
Enthralled by the unconquerable delusion,  
Magical shapes.

That moon, so often present in Yeats as a motif of contemplation, hovers over the lake on the final page of 'Love of the World'.

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<sup>21</sup> McGahern, 'Love of the World', 367, 368.

The story closes in the light of the moon and with a distinctly Yeatsian paragraph that acts like a coda, calling to mind Ille's closing statement in 'Ego Dominus Tuus' in which he calls to his anti-self, disclosing all that he seeks in a whisper:

as though  
He were afraid the birds, who cry aloud  
Their momentary cries before it is dawn,  
Would carry it away to blasphemous men.

Quietness has returned to this place after the wild tumult of the Harkin years. The birds and fish can once again rest in safety. The rich and mysterious beauty of the world can once more be acknowledged. The crying birds of this final paragraph recall those imagined in the closing lines of Yeats's magnificent dialogue:

Wildfowl scattered from the reeds along the shore out towards the centre of the lake as soon as the car door opened. They squawked and shrieked for a while before turning into a dark silent huddle. Close by, a white moon rested on the water. There was no wind. The stars in their places were clear and fixed. Who would want change since change will come without wanting? Who this night would not want to live?<sup>22</sup>

For late McGahern, the question is answered definitively: the soul takes precedence over the self, and it is inward we must turn for nourishment rather than outward and to the sweet trap of the marmalade pot.

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<sup>22</sup> McGahern, 'Love of the World', 368.



For Yeats, 'Ego Dominus Tuus' was a crucial philosophical breakthrough that would impact on everything he wrote in the last two decades of his life -- his confidence in it is reflected in his decision to use it as the closing statement of 'Hodos Chameliontos', that section of the *Autobiographies* examining his growing attachment to the spirit world that was beloved of McGahern. In Yeats's insistence on the primacy of the image as he introduces the poem, we could just as well be reading McGahern:

As I look backward upon my own writing, I take pleasure alone in those verses where it seems to me I have found something hard and cold, some articulation of the Image which is the opposite of all that I am in my daily life, and all that my country is; yet man or nation can no more make this mask or Image than the seed can be made by the soil into which it is cast.<sup>23</sup>

McGahern is saying precisely the same thing when he warns against 'self-expression', which is "always bad writing". "It's one of the fascinations of art", he continues, "and the more I know of it the more fascinating this becomes -- that the more the material is worked into artifice, the more true feeling is set free".<sup>24</sup> In both Yeats and McGahern, these are further affirmations of the classical temper, a rejection of the spontaneous for the deliberate, of nature for art.

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<sup>23</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, ed. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald; asst. eds. J. Fraser Cocks III and Gretchen Schwenker (1955; New York: Scribner, 1999), 218.

<sup>24</sup> John McGahern in interview with James Whyte, in Whyte, *History, Myth, and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 235.

## XII

### Stranger in Paradise: Dante and Epic Style

I turned round to my left, with that trust  
With which a child runs to his mother,  
When he is afraid or in trouble,

To say to Virgil: 'Less than a drop of blood  
Is left in me, that is not trembling:  
I know the signs of the ancient flame.'

But Virgil had taken himself away from us,  
Virgil, my sweetest father, to whom  
I had given myself up for my own well-being;

Nor was all that our ancient mother lost  
Enough to keep my cheeks, although washed with dew,  
From turning dark with tears, and I wept.<sup>25</sup>

– Dante, *The Divine Comedy*

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<sup>25</sup> Dante Alighieri, Canto XXX, Purgatorio, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. C. H. Sisson, int. and nts. David H. Higgins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 330-31.

If Yeats felt that Keats was wrong to pursue 'deliberate happiness', he saw in Dante an artist who he could unreservedly admire, one who chose "tragic" over "happy" art, and who, in writing *The Divine Comedy*, had produced the great epic of his people, something Yeats regretted he would never accomplish.<sup>26</sup> "Keats but gave us his dream of luxury", he writes, "but while reading Dante we never long escape the conflict, partly because the verses are at moments a mirror of history, and yet more because that history is so clear and simple that it has the quality of art". We have seen in the previous chapter how Yeats drew the title of his 1915 poem 'Ego Dominus Tuus' from Dante's *La Vita Nuova*. From adolescence, Dante was a key influence on Yeats's thinking and writing. Originally, his admiration for the great Florentine came via the Pre-Raphaelite circle of which his father, John Butler Yeats, was an enthusiastic member. "I am no Dante scholar", WBY readily admits in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, the intriguing 1917 essay to which 'Ego Dominus Tuus' forms a preface.<sup>27</sup> That noted, he recalls in his *Autobiographies* a youthful moment of artistic reverence in the Walker Gallery, Liverpool: "Yet I was in all things Pre-Raphaelite. When I was fifteen or sixteen my father had told me about Rossetti and Blake and given me their poetry to read; and once at Liverpool on my way to Sligo I had seen *Dante's Dream* in the gallery

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<sup>26</sup> Yeats feared that, not being an Irish speaker, he could never fully connect with 'the people', and thus never write Ireland's great epic: "One could still, if one had the genius, and had been born to Irish, write for these people plays and poems like those of Greece." See W. B. Yeats, 'The Galway Plains', in *Essays and Introductions* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), 213. Joyce has fun with this Yeatsian concern in *Ulysses* when he has the Dublin literary set fret over the production of a national epic -- that Joyce knew he was writing that very epic makes the joke all the sweeter.

<sup>27</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae', *Mythologies* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), 329.

there".<sup>28</sup> We see here, briefly and tantalizingly, Blake and Dante coming together for Yeats, and as I have made an argument for Blake's ghostly presence in my chapter on Yeats's *Where There is Nothing*, I would like now to consider the ways in which McGahern leans on Dante in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* to arrive at an epic style of his own.

There is an odd moment just over a third of the way through the novel in which Rutledge becomes transfixed by a postcard sent to Jamesie and Mary by their son, Jim, who is holidaying in Florence with his wife Lucy and their young family. He is expecting the card to be a picture of "a crowded beach or a café with tables under awnings or an old church", and is surprised to find instead a reproduction of Giotto's *Flight into Egypt*:

The blue of Mary's robe was lighter than the lightest blue of the sky. The robes of Joseph, the child and the angels were as brown as earth. The trees on the pale hills were flowers. The whole had an extraordinary and deeply affecting serenity: it was as if they had complete trust in the blessed light as they travelled to a place or state where nothing cast a shadow.<sup>29</sup>

Why did McGahern write this passage? Even more firmly than usual, we can discount realist verisimilitude. He could just as easily have chosen the kind of standard holiday

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<sup>28</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, ed. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (1955; New York: Scribner, 1999), 114. 'Dante's Dream' by Dante Gabriel Rossetti is still on display in the Walker Gallery, Liverpool and helped inspire my writing of this chapter.

<sup>29</sup> John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002; London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 113, 114. In the most often reproduced image of 'The Flight into Egypt' as it appears in the Arena Chapel, Padua, Giotto depicts Mary in salmon-coloured robes. The blue robes we more often associate with the Blessed Virgin appear in the less well known fresco in Assisi. I am grateful to Prof. Kristel Smentek for generously sharing her knowledge of Giotto and Marian art.

scene expected by Rutledge; equally he could have decided not to have any mention of Jim and Lucy's destination or have them go to Lanzarote or any other tourist trap. But he very deliberately chooses Florence, Giotto and the *Flight into Egypt*. Why? I would like to posit three possibilities.

The most obvious answer is that he wishes us to consider the rather haphazard, risky and unpredictable journey that all families must make over the course of their lives together. For the Christ child and His parents, life began with the threat of violence and murder, and their subsequent flight to a foreign land to avoid King Herod's slaughter of the innocents. Jim's young life was not so dramatic, and yet the card prompts Rutledge towards thoughts of that one life and its blossoming. Jamesie and Mary laugh at Rutledge's intense interest in the card – he is irked, and Mary defuses the situation with her usual charm:

'What's so funny?'

'I'd say the mother picked it. Jim just wrote. It's more like what you'd get for Christmas,' Mary said when the laughter died.

'The card is beautiful. It must have been a long journey for Jim,' Rutledge said.

While the infant Jesus's journey was from Galilee into Egypt, then back to Nazareth and the short life ahead as saviour of the world, Jim's was via a small Leitrim hill farm, schooldays through which he shone, and progress through the upper ranks of the civil service to "the new shores of Kildare Street and Mount Merrion".<sup>30</sup> If Jim is analogous

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<sup>30</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 114, 132.

with the infant, then Mary might be compared with her virginal namesake and Jamesie with Joseph.

But there is a second way one might read this passage, and that is as another of McGahern's homages to Proust.<sup>31</sup> Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* is arguably the book with the single greatest influence on McGahern as a stylist and as a thinker. So precious is the book to him that he cannot quite resist the temptation to sew its title into the very fabric of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* when he describes the downtrodden Bill Evans as a man who "could no more look forward than he could look back. He existed in a small closed circle of the present. Remembrance of things past and dreams of things to come were instruments of torture".<sup>32</sup> As well as being the single greatest meditation on the nature of time and memory that the western literary tradition has produced, Proust's masterwork is also a profound personal reflection on the value of art. More than one hundred artists are named over the course of the novel, and, as one admirer of the book has put it, the motivation for using such a wide array of visual prompts is complex and never accidental: "The paintings selected by Proust to animate and expand the imaginative world of *In Search of Lost Time* function in significant ways -- as descriptive analogies, as metaphors and symbols -- recalling the

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<sup>31</sup> McGahern's interest in Giotto may also be yet another hangover from his days as part of the X circle. A journal as interested in the visual arts as in the literary, issue three sees David Bomberg describe Giotto as "the Father of modern painting". See David Bomberg, 'The Bomberg Papers', *X: A Quarterly Review*, vol. one, no. three (June 1960), 186.

<sup>32</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 176.

Narrator's grandmother and her desire to expose her grandson to 'several "thicknesses" of art'.<sup>33</sup>

One of the artists to feature prominently in Proust is Giotto. The central use of the Florentine comes early in the novel in the section usually called 'Swann's Way'. The narrator is visiting his aunt's house at Combray as a child and is given certain Giotto images by M. Swann -- these pictures, in turn, put the child in mind of a pregnant kitchen-maid hired to help around the house during Easter:

This last recalled the cloaks in which Giotto shrouds some of his allegorical figures, of which M. Swann had given me photographs. He it was who pointed out the resemblance, and when he inquired after the kitchen-maid he would say: 'Well, how goes it with Giotto's Charity?' And indeed the poor girl, whose pregnancy had swelled and stoutened every part of her, even including her face and her squarish, elongated cheeks, did distinctly suggest those virgins, so sturdy and mannish as to seem matrons rather, in whom the virtues are personified in the Arena Chapel.<sup>34</sup>

The Arena Chapel -- or, more correctly, the Scrovegni Chapel -- is located in Padua and was visited by Proust in May 1900. Proust's young narrator goes on in 'Swann's Way' to describe two other of the frescoes and the impression they made upon him:

Despite all the admiration M. Swann professed for these figures of Giotto, it was a long time before I could find any pleasure in contemplating on the walls of our schoolroom (where the copies he had brought me were hung) that Charity devoid of charity, that Envy who looked like nothing so much as a plate in some medical book, illustrating the compression of the glottis or the uvula by a tumour

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<sup>33</sup> Eric Karpeles, *Paintings in Proust: A Visual Companion to In Search of Lost Time* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 10-11.

<sup>34</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, with revisions by D. J. Enright, published by Chatto & Windus. Quoted in Karpeles, *Paintings in Proust*, 37.

of the tongue or by the introduction of the operator's instrument, a Justice whose greyish and meanly regular features were identical with those which characterized the faces of certain pious, dessicated ladies of Combray whom I used to see at mass and many of whom had long been enrolled in the reserve forces of Injustice.<sup>35</sup>

Proust had been inspired to make the visit to Padua by John Ruskin's art criticism and to see for himself the magnificent Giotto frescoes that adorn the chapel.<sup>36</sup>

Ruskin, another figure much admired by McGahern, devotes a long essay to 'Giotto and his Works in Padua' which looks closely at the frescoes in the Arena Chapel and discusses the history of the place. Of the many artistic images rendered from the Bible generally and from the young life of Jesus particularly, section XIX of the essay sees Ruskin, like Ruttledge, transfixed by 'The Flight into Egypt':

Giotto has given a far more quiet, deliberate, and probable character to the whole scene, while he has fully marked the fact of divine protection and command in the figure of the guiding angel. Nor is the picture less interesting in its marked expression of the night. The figures are all distinctly seen, and there is no broad distribution of the gloom; but the vigorous blackness of the dress of the attendant who holds the bridle, and the scattered glitter of the lights on the Madonna's robe, are enough to produce the required effect on the mind.<sup>37</sup>

Ruskin was the single most important influence on Proust's thinking about art and aesthetics, and the French writer spent several years in the 1890s and into the first

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<sup>35</sup> Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, quoted in Karpeles, *Paintings in Proust*, 38.

<sup>36</sup> On this visit and the influence of Ruskin, see Gabrielle Townsend, *Proust's Imaginary Museum: Reproductions and Reproduction in À la Recherche Du Temps Perdu* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), 40-42.

<sup>37</sup> John Ruskin, *Giotto and his Works in Padua, being An Explanatory Notice of the Series of Woodcuts executed for the Arundel Society After the Frescoes in the Arena Chapel* (London: The Arundel Society, 1854), 86.



decade of the twentieth century reading, translating and praising Ruskin's formidable output. Two of Ruskin's essays come in for special attention from Proust, *The Bible of Amiens*, the subject of which is the magnificent gothic cathedral in that city on the Somme, and *Sesame and Lilies*, a treatise on reading and the value of libraries. McGahern was an enthusiastic reader of both translations, and their impact, particularly of the latter, is evident in his work.

McGahern's essay 'The Solitary Reader', for instance, bears startling resemblances to Proust's 1906 preface for *Sesame and Lilies*. Proust begins, "There are perhaps no days of our childhood we lived so fully as those we believe we left without having lived them, those we spent with a favorite book."<sup>38</sup> Compare this with McGahern who writes that "There are no days more full in childhood than those days that were not lived at all, the days lost in a favourite book".<sup>39</sup> The parallels are clear, as they are when any of McGahern's thoughts on the primacy of reading and the reader are set alongside those of Proust. And in an unpublished fragment among the McGahern papers at Galway we see him thinking of Ruskin's reverence for books, and advice that to read the classics is to enter into conversation with the great dead. "If we return to Ruskin", McGahern writes, "it is at least a pure friendship. We leave with

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<sup>38</sup> Marcel Proust, *On Reading Ruskin: Prefaces to La Bible d'Amiens and Sésame et les Lys with Selections from the Notes to the Translated Texts*, trans and ed. Jean Autret, William Burford and Philip J. Wolfe; int. Richard Macksey (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 99.

<sup>39</sup> John McGahern, 'The Solitary Reader', *Love of the World: Essays*, ed. Stanley van der Ziel, int. Declan Kiberd (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 89-90. This reflection on the joys of reading is repeated almost verbatim in McGahern's memoir. See John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 178.

perfect regret [...] With the growth of the intelligence we learn to differentiate the pure from the impure. The tolerance of admitting that our temperaments are themselves limited". At the conclusion of these scattered thoughts on reading and writing he quotes directly from Proust's preface to *Sesame and Lilies*: "Distinction and nobility consist, in the order of thought also, in a kind of freemasonry of customs, and in an inheritance of traditions".<sup>40</sup>

This sentence is the closing one of Proust's most telling paragraph in that preface, a credo that stayed with McGahern and that mirrored his own most deeply felt beliefs about literary practice. The paragraph is worth quoting in full as it gets to the crux of McGahern's relationship with books and with his use of classic writing as artistic touchstone:

If the taste for books increases with intelligence, its dangers, we have seen, decrease with it. An intelligent mind knows how to subordinate reading to its personal activity. Reading is for it but the noblest of distractions, the most ennobling one of all, for only reading and knowledge produce the "good manners" of the mind. We can develop the power of our sensibility and our intelligence only within ourselves, in the depths of our spiritual life. But it is in this contact with other minds, which reading is, that the education of the "manners" of the mind is obtained. In spite of everything, literary men are still like the aristocracy of the intelligence, and not to know a certain book, a certain particularity of literary science, will always remain, even in a man of genius, a mark of intellectual commonness.

Then comes that sentence, quoted above, about 'the freemasonry of customs', followed by the conclusion that "In this taste for and this entertainment in reading, very quickly

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<sup>40</sup> McGahern papers, P71/1289. Two-page handwritten fragment of non-fiction, paginated 6-7 (n.d.).

the preference of great writers is for the classics".<sup>41</sup> One has here a near exact precursor of McGahern's own exacting standards set both for himself and for others.

Before moving on from Proust, one last echo of Ruskin as it relates to McGahern is worth commenting on: that other essay translated by Proust, 'The Bible of Amiens', is, I suspect, a ghostly presence in the strange subplot that runs through *That They May Face the Rising Sun* of the construction by Patrick Ryan and Ruttledge of a simple shed on the Ruttledges' land. The shed is described, notably, on more than one occasion as a 'cathedral'. The first instance of such occurs in the context of the Shah's mistrust of Patrick Ryan and his lackadaisical attitude to work:

On Sunday the black Mercedes rolled round the shore, bringing an enormous box of chocolates wrapped with blue ribbon for Kate and a small metal box with handles. The metal was the colour of grass and mud and looked like military surplus.

'I see the cathedral is coming along,' the Shah said as he eased himself out of the front seat.

'Probably it'll stay that way for a while now. He's gone again. God knows when he'll be back.'

But, for the less worldly Ruttledge, the shed and its construction appear to hold some sort of sacred value, a value that baffles Ryan:

Once they started nailing the rafters, the frame to hold the roof took shape. Each new rafter formed its own square or rectangle, and from the ground they all held their own measure of sky; in the outer rectangles leaves from branches of overhanging ash and sycamore were mixed with the sky.

'What are you looking at, lad?'

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<sup>41</sup> Proust, 'On Reading Ruskin', 125.

'At how the rafters frame the sky. How the squares of light are more interesting than the open sky. They make it look more human by reducing the sky, and then the whole sky grows out from that small space.'

[...] 'There was a time when people were locked up for saying less than that'.

It is a moment not unlike that when Rutledge is drawn into reverie by the postcard from Jim, and underlines his essentially religious outlook on the world. Now a professed atheist, we know that he once briefly studied for the priesthood, and while his neighbours like Jamesie and John Quinn attend Sunday mass for entirely irreligious reasons -- to "see the whole performance", in the case of the former; to be seen performing in that of the latter -- Rutledge will not go because he does not believe.<sup>42</sup> And yet he is the most profoundly religious character in the book, as we see again in an earlier draft when Ryan wonders what people do to pass the time in heaven. "'Time ceases there'", answers Rutledge, "'They are happy in the knowledge and glory of God'".<sup>43</sup>

It is significant that McGahern chooses to end the book with another scene underlining the sacred nature of the shed. Patrick Ryan has finally been jolted into action by the death of his old friend Johnny Murphy and the prompt to mortality that inevitably ensues:

'It takes a hard jolt now and then to learn us that we'll not be in it for ever. Tomorrow we'll make a start, in the name of the Lord, and we'll not quit until that whole cathedral of a shed is finished,' he said in the same ringing, confident

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<sup>42</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 89, 71, 2.

<sup>43</sup> McGahern papers, P71/230 (B). Typescript of novel paginated 100-245 with many handwritten revisions (n. d.), 217.

tone that had ordered Johnny's head to lie in the west in Shruhaun so that when he rose with all the faithful he would face the rising sun.<sup>44</sup>

One hears in this odd description of the shed as cathedral a tremor of Proust who shared Ruskin's awe at the extraordinary edifice in Amiens. "But a cathedral is not only a beauty to be felt", writes Proust: "Even if it is no longer for you a teaching to be followed, it is at least still a book to be understood. The porch of a Gothic cathedral, and more particularly the porch of Amiens, the Gothic cathedral par excellence, is the Bible."<sup>45</sup> This position reflects both Rutledge's and McGahern's views on the Church -- even if it has been formally abandoned, it remains a keystone. To neglect the Bible would, in Proust's earlier quoted formulation, be, if nothing else, 'a mark of intellectual commonness'.

But what has any of this got to do with Dante, the writer I believe to have the most significant presence in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*? To answer this, let us go back to Ruskin for a moment. He begins his essay on Giotto with a description of how the Arena Chapel came to be:

Towards the close of the thirteenth century, Enrico Scrovigno, a noble Paduan, purchased, in his native city, the remains of the Roman Amphitheatre or Arena from the family of the Delesmanini, to whom those remains had been granted by the Emperor Henry III of Germany in 1090. For the power of making this purchase, Scrovigno was in all probability indebted to his father, Reginald, who, for his avarice, is placed by Dante in the seventh circle of the Inferno, and

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<sup>44</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 313-14.

<sup>45</sup> Proust, *On Reading Ruskin*, 20.

regarded apparently as the chief of the usurers there, since he is the only one who addresses Dante.<sup>46</sup>

The relevant passage in *The Divine Comedy* comes from Canto XVII of Inferno in which Dante ponders the sin of fraud:

Then my eyes wandering further over the group,  
I saw another purse as red as blood,  
And which displayed a goose whiter than butter.

And one who had an azure pregnant sow  
By way of crest on his white money-bag,  
Said to me: 'What are you doing in this ditch?

Now go away; and, as you are alive,  
You may like to know that my neighbour Vitaliano  
Is going to sit here on my left side.

With these Florentines am I, a Paduan;  
Repeatedly these deafen my ears, shouting,  
"You wait till we have that distinguished nobleman

Who will carry with him the pouch with the three goats!"  
Here he twisted his mouth and stuck out his tongue  
As an ox does when he is licking his nose.<sup>47</sup>

It is an irony that without this tormented character's fraudulently gained wealth, the Arena Chapel with its extraordinary Giotto frescoes would not exist. For our purposes, what this passage helps demonstrate is the relative narrowness of the circles in which Dante and Giotto moved. These two men were members of one of the most

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<sup>46</sup> Ruskin, *Giotto and his Works in Padua*, 7.

<sup>47</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, 116-17.

remarkable flowerings of art to occur in Western civilization: their home city Florence of the later twelfth and early-thirteenth centuries became the engine room of the Italian renaissance, and *The Divine Comedy* is that movement's greatest literary achievement. Some eight hundred years after Dante penned these words, John McGahern has Jim Murphy go to Florence with his family and then has him send his elderly parents a postcard depicting the work of Giotto because he wants to reflect on this period and on its finest poem. McGahern, like Yeats, admires Dante's tragic art and his clear eyed vision of man's inequities. Ille of 'Ego Dominus Tuus' sees in Dante an artist who "set his chisel to the hardest stone". And when, in that same poem, Yeats describes Dante with

that hollow face of his  
More plain to the mind's eye than any face  
But that of Christ<sup>48</sup>

he is almost certainly thinking of the 'Bargello' portrait, usually assigned to Giotto.<sup>49</sup> McGahern, though never as open as Yeats about his enthusiasms, has, in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, given us his own version of *The Divine Comedy*, complete with heaven, hell and purgatory. Just as Dante's journey begins in the awful darkness of the Inferno, so too McGahern exposes us early to the hellish rape scene by the lake with John Quinn as a proud Lucifer. As in Dante, we move slowly from these hideous

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<sup>48</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Ego Dominus Tuus', *The Poems*, 210.

<sup>49</sup> See Eric Griffiths and Matthew Reynolds (ed.), *Dante in English* (London: Penguin, 2005), 289.

depths into the light of Paradise, the possibility of witnessing the Creator's majesty as we face the rising sun. This movement from darkness to light is what, in Dante's eyes, makes his work a Comedy rather than a Tragedy.<sup>50</sup>

I speculated in my chapter on Yeats's *Where There is Nothing* that the unmistakable host of references to heaven and hell which pepper McGahern's final novel might be read as a nod to William Blake, but Dante seems an even stronger candidate. McGahern tells us in his memoir that for him as a child growing up in the west of Ireland in the middle of the twentieth century, Heaven, Hell and Purgatory were real places that invoked real feelings:

Heaven was in the sky. Hell was in the bowels of the earth. There, eternal fire raged. The souls of the damned had to dwell in hell through all eternity, deprived forever of the sight of the face of God. At its entrance was a great river. Across a wide plain, naked and weeping, came the souls of the damned from the Judgment Seat, bearing only a single coin to give to the boatman to take them across the river into eternal fire.

Between this hell and heaven, purgatory was placed. Descriptions of it were vague, probably because all of us expected to spend time there.<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, Dante's *The Divine Comedy* is divided into the three parts, Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso, and describes Dante's journey through these three places, guided first by Virgil and towards the end of Purgatorio onwards by the great object of Dante's love, Beatrice. Virgil is described throughout as Dante's 'guide', sometimes

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<sup>50</sup> On this point, see Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (1946; New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1953), 162.

<sup>51</sup> McGahern, *Memoir*, 10-11.



his 'dear guide', sometimes his 'sweet guide'. Canto I of *Inferno* sees Virgil telling Dante what to expect from his time in the underworld:

The course I think would be the best for you,  
Is to follow me, and I will act as your guide,  
And show a way out of here, by a place in eternity,

Where you will hear the shrieks of men without hope,  
And will see the ancient spirits in such pain  
That every one of them calls out for a second death;

And then you will see those who, though in the fire,  
Are happy because they hope that they will come,  
Whenever it may be, to join the blessed

Virgil is depicted as all knowing and empathetic: "That wise and gentle man, who knew everything".<sup>52</sup>

In *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, the part of Dante is taken by Ruttledge and that of Virgil by Jamesie, and sometimes, to a lesser extent, by the Shah. These parallels are made absolutely explicit only once, three pages from the novel's end, when Jamesie bemoans Patrick Ryan's lackadaisical attitude to his farming chores:

‘Isn’t Patrick Ryan the most hopeless man? The poor cattle alone and fending for themselves on that big hill and Patrick astray all over the country. I may not have travelled far but I know the whole world,’ he said with a wide sweep of his arm.

‘You do know the whole world,’ Ruttledge said. ‘And you have been my sweet guide.’

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<sup>52</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, 50, 78.

That 'sweetness' that Dante attaches to Virgil is there too at the beginning of the novel, in McGahern's very first description of Jamesie, who "was shining and handsome. An intense vividness and sweetness of nature showed in every quick, expressive movement". A few pages later, we see Jamesie describe himself in distinctly Virgilian terms: "I've never, never moved from here and I know the whole world". Of course, Virgil and Jamesie are not an exact match, nor are they intended to be, but once the Dantean allusion is recognized, other aspects and moments of *The Divine Comedy* come into focus across the novel.

As suggested when discussing *Where There is Nothing*, words like paradise, heaven, hell and even purgatory are used far too frequently throughout the novel to be merely figures of speech or throwaway descriptors. 'Stranger in Paradise', the song sung by the two belligerent lorry drivers at the mart to cool a dangerously overheating and potentially violent exchange, is not chosen idly but to bring us into the Dantean underworld. Jamesie, as well as being Ruttledge's 'sweet guide', is consistently portrayed as a saintly and sagacious presence, as in the following meeting with Kate:

'You were like an angel coming today,' Kate said. 'I was a bit down.'  
'No good, Kate. No good and I thought you didn't believe,' he countered sharply.  
'There are lay angels,' she said.  
'No wings. Can't fly,' he called out as he cycled after the disappearing heron.

His ability to be in the right place at the right time with a quiet word of advice or a helping hand seems, at least in one memorable scene when Ruttledge fears he will lose a much loved cow in calf, almost supernatural:

He turned and found Jamesie staring at the cow. The spruce wood behind him was almost in night. He had crept up without a sound. 'Hel-lo. Hel-lo,' he called in a hushed, conspiratorial voice.

'You're an angel of the Lord.'

And he is given to dispensing pithy advice about the nature of the world through which he guides the Ruttledges, who he loves dearly, but who he also sees as somewhat innocent. When Kate tells him that Patrick Ryan's parents acted unfairly by favouring Patrick over their other son Edmund, Jamesie advises simply that "There's nothing right or wrong in this world. Only what happens." As well as pointing us towards *The Divine Comedy*, passages such as those just quoted bring us back to Giotto and the angels that so enthrall both Ruttledge and Ruskin.

But Jamesie is not Ruttledge's only guide. If one wanted to take the Dantean parallels to their limit one might read Kate as being analogous to Beatrice who leads Dante through paradise. More compelling is an association of the Shah as a guide through purgatory, for it is one of the few places he has spent any time outside of the small community at the core of the novel. The purgatory in question can be found on a lake isle in Donegal:

'I'm going on a bit of a holiday and leaving this here,' he announced as he placed the metal box on the table. He had never gone on a holiday, unless three days many years before on Lough Derg counted as a holiday. From time to time he would still recall how much he had suffered: the cold, the wet, the lack of sleep, the never-ending circle of prayer in bare feet, the hunger, the sharp stones. 'If hell is anything like it I'm sticking to the straight and narrow'. The one hot Sunday or two he drove to the ocean at Bundoran every year to wallow in the waves and lie in the sun until he was burned pink hardly counted as holiday.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 312, 2, 7, 266, 55, 58, 89-90.

Station Island in Lough Derg -- or St Patrick's Purgatory -- has inspired writers like Seán O'Faoláin, Patrick Kavanagh and Seamus Heaney. It is a place of penance that traditionally acted as a portal to the underworld where pilgrims are required to undergo a rigorous round of spiritual exercises that includes fasting, staying awake throughout the night and reciting many thousands of prayers as they circle in their bare feet the jagged stones of former monastic cells and the interior and exterior of the Basilica. It is by no means unusual for someone like the Shah from this border county to have 'done' Lough Derg, but McGahern wishes to have him visit purgatory for reasons beyond rural Catholic devotion.<sup>54</sup> In one early draft of the novel he considered allowing the reader see the shadow of Dante a little more clearly in a conversation between Rutledge and the Shah about John Quinn's first unsettling visit to the Rutledge house:

'It was a strange apparition -- the sweet talk, the poetry. The birds singing like troopers, the blue mountains, the swans: businessman's poetry.'

'What on earth was he selling?'

'Paradise. His own little bit of heaven. Himself.'

Every world is both a material world of surface and a world that extends far underground. A stranger cannot reach the underworld of memory and knowledge and law without guides. The Shah had the knowledge and intelligence, and while it was clear that John Quinn amused him greatly, he was only willing to be a guide within certain limits.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> McGahern's mother Susan took part in the Lough Derg pilgrimage in preparation for her marriage. See McGahern, *Memoir*, 55.

<sup>55</sup> McGahern papers, P71/230 (A). Typescript with many revisions in hand, paginated 1-99 (n. d.), 56.

McGahern thought better of using such a revealing nod towards *The Divine Comedy* in the final published version of the book, but Dante was very clearly on his mind throughout its composition.

Apart from this rather loose scaffolding of moral guides and journeys through unknown and unfamiliar worlds, what other use has McGahern for Dante? Some critics have noted of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* that it is not really a novel at all, and that it is very difficult to place it into one genre or another. Declan Kiberd suggests of the previous novel, *Amongst Women*, that "the epic strain in the Irish novel has never been more definitively affirmed". And he goes on to suggest -- rightly, in my view -- that McGahern shows an affinity to epic unseen in other Irish writers of his generation. "McGahern", he argues, "is the major contemporary inheritor of a durable mode of Irish writing: an artist of the self-enclosed world. Another name for this kind of work is 'epic'".<sup>56</sup> Kiberd's essay was written before the publication of McGahern's last novel, but everything he has to say about *Amongst Women*'s epic style applies even more truly to *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, and fascination with the genre is what draws McGahern to Dante in the late work and what interested him in Homer from at least the 1970s onward.

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<sup>56</sup> Declan Kiberd, 'John McGahern's *Amongst Women*', in Maria Tymoczko and Colin Ireland (ed.), *Language and Tradition in Ireland: Continuities and Displacements* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press; published in cooperation with the American Conference for Irish Studies, 2003), 211, 195.

Key to McGahern's thinking on epic style is Paolo Vivante's brilliant study of Homer's 'poetic perception of reality', *The Homeric Imagination* (1970). To read Vivante is to read McGahern, and one is struck again and again across his study by lines which must have been strikingly useful and redolent of McGahern's own thought processes about artistic representation and the workings of the imagination. "Can any story", wondered Vivante, "be told as if its incidents took place entirely by themselves, in their own time, out of relation with any definite period? [...] Such is in Homer the time of nature. Its basic unit is the day".<sup>57</sup> It is from Vivante's study that McGahern quotes in early drafts of the short story 'Bank Holiday' when he has the story's central character, the middle-aged, high-ranking civil servant, Patrick McDonough, become obsessed with a particular line he returns again and again to read in a Dublin bookshop: "McDonough had come to Hannas to look at one book, a book on Homer's world and a phrase that had fascinated him for months."<sup>58</sup> The phrase then quoted comes from chapter four of *The Homeric Imagination*, titled 'Time and Life in Homer': "What is he doing with his life, we say: and our judgement makes up for the failure to realize sympathetically the natural process of living". Here Vivante expands on what he sees as Homer's particular way of treating time, and it is here that McGahern and Vivante overlap most strikingly. "Homeric poetry is concise, forcible", writes Vivante:

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<sup>57</sup> Paolo Vivante, *The Homeric Imagination: A Study of Homer's Poetic Perception of Reality* (Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1970), 128-29.

<sup>58</sup> McGahern papers, P71/569. Handwritten eight-page draft of 'Bank Holiday', (n. d.), 1. McGahern, in the final 1985 published version of the story, thinks better of referencing Homer directly.

"Its condensed power partly resides in the way it renders the lapse of time, of life [...] what we mean by life and experience is integrated into the meaning of each verbal form, while for Homer the actual fact of living is nothing else but being alive, keeping alive, growing".<sup>59</sup>

Interestingly, in later drafts of 'Bank Holiday', and in the final published version, all mention of Homer is excised, as is the quote from Vivante. But the plotline of the book that McDonough feels compelled to return to, but not to buy, is retained in a scene where the bookstore manager offers a discount but is repelled:

The manager moved away, flicking the feathers along a row of spines in a gesture of annoyance. The spell was ended, but it was fair enough; the shop had to sell books, and he knew that if he bought the book it was unlikely that he would ever give it the same attention again.<sup>60</sup>

Here is one of those examples in McGahern where a character has need of a touchstone, a magical formula of words that casts a 'spell' and makes life somehow clearer and more tolerable.<sup>61</sup> While Homer and Vivante are no longer named, their presence is retained in McGahern's treatment of time in the story.

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<sup>59</sup> Vivante, *The Homeric Imagination*, 186.

<sup>60</sup> John McGahern, 'Bank Holiday', *Creatures of the Earth New and Selected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 302-03.

<sup>61</sup> The leading example of a McGahern character using a touchstone comes in *The Pornographer* where the novel's hero tells us that he wears about him like a scapular words taken from Thomas De Quincey's *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets*. See my introduction for further discussion of this usage.

That McDonough's basic unit of time is the day is made clear throughout. When the young American woman he woos in the story agrees to a date, it is stated that "A whole day was secured", and the supremacy of 'the day' is underlined further in McDonough's pained remembrance of the end of a previous passionate affair. "It was eerie to set down those days", he thinks, "beside the days that had just gone by, call them by the same name. How slowly those days had moved, as if waiting for something to begin: now all the days were speeding, slipping silently by like air."<sup>62</sup> That the story is named for a single day in this context is also not without its significance. And McGahern is open about his admiration for *The Homeric Imagination* in 'What is my Language?' his essay on Tomás Ó Criomhthain's account of life on the Blaskets, *The Islandman*. "I have taken the original argument -- that style itself must be the outcome of a view of reality", he writes, "from Paolo Vivante's great work [...] Ó Criomhthain's style is such an outcome, and while it would be foolish to compare him to Homer, he did give vivid utterance to a society brought to refinement by the conditions of an unchanging reality over many days and generations".<sup>63</sup>

If the basic unit of time for Homer is the day, the same is true for McGahern, not just in 'Bank Holiday' but across almost his whole oeuvre. His characters'

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<sup>62</sup> McGahern, 'Bank Holiday', *Creatures of the Earth*, 317.

<sup>63</sup> McGahern, 'What is my Language?', *Love of the World*, 272. Vivante returns the admiration in a 1991 essay in which he praises McGahern's attempts to capture a Homeric sense of time in stories such as 'Swallows', 'Along the Edges' and 'Doorways'. See Paolo Vivante, 'McGahern and the Homeric Moment', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1 (July 1991), 53-56.



reverence for the day and their fear of time wasting is a constant, as it is for Ó Criomhthain's islandman. This structuring of time around individual worlds called days gives much of McGahern's fiction, and particularly his late novels, a feeling of mythic timelessness. Consider, for instance, the opening lines of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*:

The morning was clear. There was no wind on the lake. There was also a great stillness. When the bells rang out for Mass, the strokes trembling on the water, they had the entire world to themselves.

The doors of the house were open. Jamesie entered without knocking and came in noiselessly until he stood in the doorway of the large room where the Rutledges were sitting. He stood as still as if waiting under trees for returning wildfowl. He expected his discovery to be quick. There would be a cry of surprise and reproach; he would counter by accusing them of not being watchful enough. There would be welcome and laughter.<sup>64</sup>

What sort of language is this? The opening paragraph has a numinous, transcendent calm to it, very far from straightforward realist storytelling -- what Vivante calls "a pervasive subjective craving for what is not". And then the following lines are told almost entirely in the subjunctive mood, where everything is predictable because life in this small place among these dear friends has become so quiet and repetitive that it has a circular, ahistorical, mythic quality. Vivante argues that this approach to time is characteristic of the Homeric imagination:

This strong feeling for the days and for the life which they enclose accounts for the perfect stillness and almost timeless atmosphere which we find in the poems whenever the moments of tension subside and people, or things, simply exist in

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<sup>64</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 1.

themselves and by themselves. Men and women seem then immune from all hazard, as solid and whole in their natural life as a full-grown tree.<sup>65</sup>

The subjunctive, which works so well to give this feeling of time that is no longer linear -- or "that did not have to run to any conclusion",<sup>66</sup> as he describes it in the final line of 'Gold Watch' -- is a favourite mood of McGahern's: another paragraph-length passage of 'woulds' comes quickly after the opening of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* with a description of how Jamesie's brother Johnny will be welcomed home for his annual summer trip from England: "The holy pictures and the wedding photographs would be taken down, the glass wiped and polished. His bed would be made with crisp linen and draped with the red blanket." And so on. It is not coincidental that the paragraph ends with a notably epic sweep: "The house couldn't have been prepared any better for a god coming home to his old place on earth."<sup>67</sup>

Drawing sustenance from Vivante's Homer as he had been doing for many years, McGahern turned in this final, moving masterpiece to Dante and his great iteration, not just of renaissance Florence, but of all of life, as his last artistic touchstone. The result provides us with what W. B. Yeats regretted he could not, an Irish epic, and carries within it a vision of extraordinary beauty and calm. "By looking again at nature after reading Homer", writes Vivante, "we may thus see it with a fresh

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<sup>65</sup> Vivante, *The Homeric Imagination*, 127, 133.

<sup>66</sup> McGahern, 'Gold Watch', *Creatures of the Earth*, 150.

<sup>67</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 4, 5.

eyesight, with a fresh feeling for what it is and what it means."<sup>68</sup> It is hard to think of a better way to describe the effect this last McGahern novel has on the reader. McGahern's final novel is his most successful and most deliberate attempt at writing epic. For *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is not the history of a community but of all communities, not an examination of an historical moment but of all historical moments. Erich Auerbach writes memorably of *The Divine Comedy* in *Mimesis*, another work of criticism much admired by McGahern, that it is a literary moment "in which all imaginable spheres of reality appear: past and present, sublime grandeur and vile vulgarity, history and legend, tragic and comic occurrences, man and nature; finally, it is the story of Dante's -- i.e., one single individual's -- life and salvation, and thus a figure of the story of mankind's salvation in general". It is, Auerbach concludes, "the history of man's inner life and unfolding".<sup>69</sup> *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is, similarly, an account of man's salvation -- McGahern knew it would be his last novel, and while it would be misguided to see it as a sunny, bucolic coda to a writing career steeped in darkness, it is a kind of answer, a closing Amen to the prayer of life.

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<sup>68</sup> Vivante, *The Homeric Imagination*, viii.

<sup>69</sup> Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 165, 177.

## Conclusion: What Then?

'The work is done,' grown old he thought,  
'According to my boyish plan;  
Let the fools rage, I swerved in naught,  
Something to perfection brought';  
*But louder sang that ghost, 'What then?'*<sup>70</sup>

– W. B. Yeats, 'What Then?'

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<sup>70</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'What Then?', *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, 1994), 349.

Like Jamesie of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, John McGahern stands hidden behind the wind breaks and shelterbelts, watching stealthily as we try to bring his work to life. Occasionally his touchstones reveal themselves to provide assistance, but his nature as a writer is what Joyce would call 'scrupulous'. Why demand so much from the reader? John Ruskin has the best answer to that question in his thoughts on the purpose of literary concealment:

And be sure, also, if the author is worth anything, that you will not get at his meaning all at once; – nay, that at his whole meaning you will not for a long time arrive in any wise. Not that he does not say what he means, and in strong words too; but he cannot say it all; and what is more strange, will not, but in a hidden way and in parables, in order that he may be sure you want it.<sup>71</sup>

By being difficult, by not spelling it out, McGahern is making sure we want it, and, if we do, then we will experience an enrichment of the intellect and the soul. This is something he learned while young as he entered the world of great books and began to absorb the good manners of the mind. Now, having conversed with the great tradition, and having played with it and transformed it in the shadow of his own personality, his work offers us the chance to bathe in the same light. Though now ten years dead, "he continues to enlighten us", as Proust wrote of Ruskin, "like those dead stars whose light reaches us still".<sup>72</sup> McGahern, by dint of the sort of 'atrocious labour'

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<sup>71</sup> John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, ed. and int. Deborah Epstein Nord, with essays by Elizabeth Helsinger, Seth Koven and Jan Marsh (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 34.

<sup>72</sup> Marcel Proust, *On Reading Ruskin: Prefaces to La Bible d'Amiens and Sésame et les Lys with Selections from the Notes to the Translated Texts*, trans and ed. Jean Autret, William Burford, and Phillip J. Wolfe; int. Richard Macksey (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 49.

considered a prerequisite by Flaubert to producing great art, has left behind a body of work that joins the canon, and will stand for generations to come.

Like Yeats, as McGahern approached the end of his life everything he wrote and said began to take on a valedictory quality. And, like Yeats, he saved some of his finest work till last. One of the many subplots woven into the fictional world of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is the progress and fate of the Shah's garage business on the edge of town. He is the closest thing this little community has to a business tycoon and likes to let people know it by driving a big Mercedes. Yet despite his regal nickname, he has become a small time business success by stealth and by prudence rather than by inheritance or any grandiosity. As the novel moves forward and the seasons pass, the Shah begins to think of retirement and approaches his nephew, Ruttledge, to help him broker the sale of the business to his long time partner Frank Dolan. Despite the fact that he and Dolan never seem to communicate, there is a tacit respect between them that prompts the Shah towards thinking of selling what it has taken him a lifetime to create. After talking it through with a sceptical Ruttledge he stands looking out over the countryside in which he has been born and raised:

The sedge of Gloria Bog and the little birches had no colour. The mountains were hidden. From this hanging hill the Shah had always looked across the lake and bog towards those mountains. [...] 'The rain comes down. Grass grows. Children get old,' the Shah said suddenly. 'That's it. We all know. We know full well and can't even whisper it loud. We know in spite of them.'<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002; London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 158.

And thus the everyday mystery of life is revealed and accepted in one of those vignettes at which McGahern excels when ordinary people in ordinary lives see behind the veil and accept with clear-eyed stoicism their fate as mortals. But that is not to say that McGahern's vision is fatalistic, that we ought to accept what happens through the days of our lives as readily as we bear the falling rain.

A brief exchange between Patrick McDonough and Mary Kelleher of 'Bank Holiday' provides a nice illustration of the ever present question that lies at the heart of all McGahern's work:

She was so lovely in the evening that he felt himself leaning towards her. He did not like the weakness. 'I find myself falling increasingly into an unattractive puzzlement,' he said, 'mulling over that old, useless chestnut, What is life?'

'It's the fact of being alive, I suppose, a duration of time, as the scholars would say,' and she smiled teasingly. 'Puzzling out what it is must be part of it as well.'<sup>74</sup>

What the meaning of life is must, inevitably, remain elusive and personal. By reading McGahern you will not find an answer to the question, but you will be forced to ask it. And though the journey through the books may often be painful and frightening -- from the gnawing doubts of the terminally ill Elizabeth Reegan of *The Barracks*, through the crippling guilt of Patrick in *The Leavetaking*, and forward to the latent and scarifying violence of Moran in *Amongst Women* -- we arrive, having come through the work, enlightened and encouraged. It is appropriate that McGahern's final fictional

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<sup>74</sup> John McGahern, 'Bank Holiday', *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 312.

lead should be Joe Ruttledge who believes that value lies in a world of "Kindness... understanding... sympathy maybe".<sup>75</sup>

As McGahern reached the closing days of his life he turned again to Yeats, perhaps the greatest of all poets at trying to reveal to himself and to us the true nature of things, what lies behind 'the trembling veil' of our sensory experiences. The final McGahern piece to be published before his death in March 2006 was an article titled 'God and Me'; the closing words are a quote from Yeats's hauntingly sceptical meditation on man's vanity, 'What Then?'.<sup>76</sup> The short essay admits to a loss of faith but worries about what is replacing the austere Church of McGahern's youth. "When a long abuse of power is corrected", he writes, "it is generally replaced by an opposite violence". Society's efforts to replace the power of the church with the sureties of science, he argues, will prove in vain. The need for worship and faith grows "out of a human need". This need, he concludes: "can be alleviated by material ease and scientific advancement but never abolished. Still sings that ghost, 'What then?'"<sup>77</sup>

The ghost of 'What Then?' is Plato, and the quote comes from Yeats who, at the age of 72, had entered that period of his life when balance sheets were being drawn and final conclusions reached. In 'What Then?' the poet ruminates on success and

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<sup>75</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 79.

<sup>76</sup> This article appeared in the Spring 2006 edition of *Granta: The Magazine of New Writing* and is reproduced in McGahern's collected essays, *Love of the World: Essays*, ed. Stanley van der Ziel, int. Declan Kiberd (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 149-51.

<sup>77</sup> John McGahern, 'God and Me', 151.



ambition, and sees the material achievements of man, no matter how great, as brittle, maybe even worthless. There is always something else, something more to be achieved or aimed at, and therefore to sacrifice one's life to bringing 'something to perfection' is folly. Joe Rutledge has also arrived at this knowledge and is bemused by Patrick Ryan's call to action:

'Most of the people in this part of the country will never rise off their arses in the ditches. You have to have something behind you to be able to rise.'

Rise to what? Came to Rutledge's lips, but he didn't speak it. 'I suppose they'll move around in the light for a while like the rest of us and disappear,' he said.<sup>78</sup>

The Shah, too, recognizes this truth as he looks out over the lake and the mountains beyond in the wake of his decision to sell up. Everything ends as surely as it begins.

McGahern's work is a struggle with the same issue that confronted Yeats, and gnaws away at all reflective people: what should I do? It has been suggested that the title of his second novel, *The Dark*, is drawn from 'The Choice', another Yeats poem that ponders the same question as 'What Then?':

The intellect of man is forced to choose  
Perfection of the life, or of the work,  
And if it take the second must refuse  
A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 49.

<sup>79</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'The Choice', *The Poems*, 296. On McGahern's possible use of this poem for the title of his second novel, see Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 64; and David Malcolm, *Understanding John McGahern* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 28.

Young Mahoney of *The Dark* is faced with a choice at that novel's close – to stay at university and live a life of the mind or to leave and pit himself against the world. Ultimately, as he walks away from campus life he believes that there is, in fact, no choice at all, that the best that can be hoped for is tranquillity in the face of death:

One day, one day, you'd come perhaps to more real authority than all this, an authority that had need of neither vast buildings nor professorial chairs nor robes nor solemn organ tones, an authority that was simply a state of mind, a calmness even in the face of the turmoil of your own passing.<sup>80</sup>

McGahern, both through his life and through his writing, arrived at that still centre, as Fr Liam Kelly recounted in an obituary in the months after his death:

He was completely at peace during his last days and did not complain about his cancer or about dying while still in his early seventies. Instead he quoted from Yeats's translation of *Oedipus at Colonus*:

Endure what life God gives and ask no longer span  
Cease to remember the delights of youth, travel-wearied man [...]  
Never to have lived is best, ancient writers say;  
Never to have drawn the breath of life, never to have looked  
    into the eye of day;  
The second best's a gay goodnight and quickly turn away.<sup>81</sup>

Yeats would memorably recycle this Sophoclean stoicism in the poem that amounts to his own burial instructions, 'Under Ben Bulben', and its plea to the graveside visitor to "cast a cold eye on life, on death."<sup>82</sup> Not untypically, McGahern's grave carries no such sententious credo, tucked away as it is by the side of Aughawillan Church on a

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<sup>80</sup> John McGahern, *The Dark* (1965; London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 188.

<sup>81</sup> Liam Kelly, 'Endure what life God gives and ask no longer span...', *The Furrow*, vol. 57, no. 5 (May 2006), 302.

<sup>82</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Under Ben Bulben', *The Poems*, 376.

Leitrim hillside bearing only his name and dates and those of his beloved mother. In death, as in life, he treasures manners, tact and courtesy. He needs no monument, no "hero-courageous tomb", for he has left us his magical words.<sup>83</sup> "For the man of genius", Proust tells us, "cannot give birth to immortal works except by creating them in the image, not of his mortal being, but of the humanity he bears within himself. His thoughts are, in a way, lent to him for his lifetime, of which they are the companions. At his death they return to humanity and teach it".<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal, Dublin: Erected to the memory of Mrs Dermot O'Brien', *Collected Poems*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 227.

<sup>84</sup> Proust, *On Reading Ruskin*, 29.

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